

National/transnational negotiations: the renewal of the cultural languages in Latin America and Rodrigo Fresán's *Argentine History*, *The Speed of Things* and *Kensington Gardens*.

Emilse Beatriz Hidalgo
University of Nottingham

Introduction

The postdictatorial period of cultural production in South American countries like Chile, Brazil, and Argentina has undergone, for the past three decades, a noticeable transformation of its symbolic imaginaries brought about not only by the spread of mass media forms of communication but also by the social and economic processes of globalization, such as migration and transnational trade agreements. These phenomena have converged and given rise, since the 1980s, to a condition of cultural hybridity, which is one of the main features of Latin American cultures today as Nestor García Canclini has convincingly argued (1995; 1999). One example of how cultural hybridity came to be incorporated in the literature written after the 1980s is the so-called "McOndo" group, of which Rodrigo Fresán (Argentina), Alberto Fuguet (Chile) and Sergio Gómez (Chile) are part. The ironic juxtaposition of the pop referents of global modernity (MacDonald's, Macintosh computers, and condominiums) with Macondo, Gabriel García Márquez's magic realist place, cleverly points to the literary project of the group: they incorporate the imaginaries of popular and mass media culture without falling into best-sellerism and they write a kind of literature which is explicitly removed from the *boom's* magic-realist aesthetic.

In fact, urban and popular culture representations began to make impressive appearances in Latin American literature in the late 1960s with the Mexican movement called "La Onda" (José Agustín, Gustavo Sainz) and the experimental techniques displayed in famous novels like the Argentinean Manuel Puig's *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* (1968), *Heartbreak Tango* (1969) and *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (1976) and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) to mention just a few representative examples. These novels experimented formally with narrative montage whilst incorporating and thematising the impact of radio and film into the imaginaries of Latin Americans. Puig's narrative universe is one, "in which radio and the photographic image—as well as filmic representation—have invaded private homes and have taken control of public spaces" as Paz-Soldán and Castillo argue (10). However, and despite the recognition that these novels gained at the time, it was the magical realism practised during the 1960s and 1970s by the *boom* writers (García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier among others) that became canonised during the 1970s by the United States and European academics as the representative paradigm of Latin American literature.

In the 1990s, the tendency that had been evident in writers like Puig and Vargas Llosa re-emerged in the McOndo group, who rejected magical realism as a commercial stereotype *for export* and chose instead to set their stories in urban landscapes and to incorporate into their writing the mass-mediated codes of pop culture whilst retaining a certain degree of technical difficulty. The history of the McOndo group goes back to 1994, when, while attending an International Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, the Chilean writer Alberto Fuguet submitted a short-story to the *Iowa Review*. The short-story was rejected by the editor on the grounds that "it was not Latin American enough," that is to say, it did not contain any fantastical or magical realist elements that made it publishable in the United States and so, as the editor later remarked, "the story could easily have taken place right there, in [North] America" (Fuguet 1997). According to Fuguet, the *latino* topics the publishers expected were either stories about the rural

and the underdeveloped or the exotic sagas of suffering farm labourers or magic realist worlds. In 1996, Fuguet launched a counter-attack in the form of a short-story anthology entitled *McOndo*.¹ The book –edited and introduced by Fuguet and Sergio Gómez– brought together 17 short stories written by young (all male) writers from Latin America and Spain who had mostly started their literary careers in the 1990s and had been born after the late 1950s. Their short-stories were a response to a world where all sorts of transnational crossings characterised the cultural productions of the turn of the century.

Unlike the *boom* writers, according to Fuguet and Gómez, the McOndian artist is a young Latin American writer who rejects magical realism as a literary mode (since it has only served to ‘exoticise’ representations of Latin America) and who lives, especially since the beginning of the 1990s, in a Latin America of shopping malls, cable television, suburbs and pollution. McOndo writers like the Bolivian Edmundo Paz Soldán are concerned with the formation of more flexible identities that reject stereotypical reductionisms and which are “less tied than before to the reference point of both political and civilian identities” (Paz Soldán 2004). The representations of the new subjectivities these writers explore are no doubt tied to the historic moment of cultural and economic globalization, to the erosion of the frontiers of the nation-state and a local sense of identity crossed by transnational networks of communication which García Canclini (1995; 1999) identifies as the specific reality of many Latin American countries today. The book also came to function as a criticism of the rules of international market capitalism which prescribed the sort of cultural difference of Latin America to be consumed abroad. As Fuguet argues

In the past, Latin American writers felt compelled to leave their home countries to be able to write about them. Not only were they seeking political freedom, but cultural nutrition. As expatriates they idealised their countries to the point that they created a world that never really existed. I feel very comfortable at my desk in Santiago, writing about the world around me. A world that comes to me through television, radio, the Internet and movies, which I send back through my fiction. My Latin American fiction. (Fuguet 1997)

Although Fuguet’s statement clearly generalises and oversimplifies the Latin American fiction of the *boom* period, his views may be recontextualised in the frame of the debates going on in anthropology and sociology in Latin America since the 1950s. Those debates, as García Canclini has pointed out (1991), have revolved around the effects of modernity in the continent with cultural anthropologists, on the one hand, who in extreme cases, have studied Latin America from the perspective of a romantic nativism intent on preserving its pre-modern traditions; and sociologists and media experts on the other, who have critiqued Latin American modernity as a narrowly achieved and imperfect echo of the industrialised models offered by Western European countries and the United States. Whereas the first group would celebrate García Márquez’s Macondo as representative of the authentic pre-modern Latin American spirit, the second group would see the McOndo writers as selling out to or simply imitating North American pop culture and (post)modernity. But neither of these extreme positions tells the complete picture nor are they satisfactory when it comes to trying to describe and explain current Latin American hybridity. Unlike Fuguet’s notion that the boom writers ‘created a world that never really existed,’ Latin America may be better understood by avoiding extreme Manichean positions, as García Canclini argues:

In a continent where 70% of the population lives in cities, made up mostly by recent migrants [...] and where capitalist economic relations, electronic culture and sometimes tourism are common experiences for those who still live in rural areas, the traditional and the modern can no longer be conceived as independent entities. If both hegemonic and folk cultures are now hybrid cultures, if, in this sense, it is undeniable that we live in a postmodern era, a time of *bricolage* where diverse cultures, previously apart, now cross and intermingle, the task of the scholar is understanding why, in Latin America, we are this mixture of heterogeneous memories and truncated innovations. (1991:48, my translation).

For García Canclini, then, any study of culture in Latin America from the 1980s onwards requires an awareness of a broader social context and of frontier/transnational cultural exchanges that cannot be reduced to the old dualisms local/foreign, popular/high culture. The formation of new hybrid identities in Latin America resulting from the neoliberal policies and globalization that has swept the continent since the 1980s, where ‘the world comes to [us] through television, radio, the Internet and movies,’ as Fuguet puts it, has meant the incorporation of mass media culture to the older distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low.’ This suggests that once again, the debates in social and anthropological studies on globalization, identity politics, hybridization and deterritorialisation converge with an interest in artistic works set in fluid dialogue with these issues as the notion of *bricolage* (both cultural and textual) suggests.

It is interesting, though, that despite his diatribe against the US academia's notions of the Latin American canon, Fuguet feels he is not involved in any political agenda. He has stated that "In a continent that was once ultra-politicised, young, *apolitical* writers like myself are now writing without an overt agenda about their experiences" (1997, italics mine). Although the statement strikes one as rather naïve, his perception of politics is no doubt far removed from the more explicit agendas of other Latin American writers like Sarmiento's (1811-1888), when the political project of the modern nation-state was at stake, or from Cortazar's (1914-1984), when the utopian and revolutionary projects of the left took centre-stage. Thus, although Fuguet is aware of an explicit distance from these two great political moments of Latin American political history (the formation of the national identity and the utopias of the 60s), his book nevertheless engages with the debates on the politics of identity and globalization that theorists like Tomlinson (1999; 2003) and García Canclini (1995; 1999) have identified at the core of cultural studies today, and that, in fact, Fuguet himself has acknowledged as part of his literary agenda:

I feel the great literary theme of Latin American identity (who are we?) must now take a back seat to the theme of personal identity (Who am I?). The McOndo writers [...] base their stories on individual lives, instead of collective epics. This new genre may be one of the by products of a free market economy and the privatization craze that has swept South America. [...] I don't deny that there exists a colourful, exotic aspect to Latin America, but in my opinion, life on this continent is far too complex to be so simply categorised. It is an injustice to reduce the essence of Latin America to men in ponchos and sombreros, gun-toting drug lords and sensual salsa-swinging señoritas. (June 11, 1997)

Globalization is no doubt differently imagined according to the reality one lives as García Canclini states (*GI* 1999). The central issue today, for this theorist, is neither to defend a local/national identity (Is there *one*?) nor to become globalized, but to find ways of understanding heterogeneity, difference and inequality when the old local certainties lose their protagonic role, stereotypes break down, and people have access to other cultural imaginaries (*GI* 30). Similarly, for Andreas Huyssen, although it is true that the stable links between national traditions (and their historical pasts) and their geographic and political groundings have become weaker due to the processes of cultural globalization, those links have not been completely written over, erased or forgotten. On the contrary, they have been renegotiated in the clash between globalizing forces and new productions and practices of local cultures (Huyssen 4) as the whole McOndo public debate shows. As Huyssen argues "modernity has brought with it a very real compression of time and space. But in the register of imaginaries, it has also expanded our horizons of time and space beyond the local, the national, even the international" (*ibid.*). The affirmation of the local, therefore, is not an obstacle to or a denial of the global but it poses the question of what it means to enter globalization in different ways than through the mere "macdonaldization" of the world. There are, as Canclini argues, many other intermediary positions between McDonald's and Macondo (*GI* 51-52).

For García Canclini, whereas in the 1960s, the debates between high and popular culture converged with the concerns of social movements who sought to dismantle the rigid hierarchies of modernity; today the debate largely revolves around the convergence of culture with market capitalism and thus the main issue is whether to produce and consume cultural goods which are serious and [politically] committed or light, mass-produced and profitable entertainment (*GI* 196-97). This view is shared by Huyssen who also insists on a fundamental difference between a type of commodified cultural memory that is produced and marketed for "a media and consumer society that increasingly voids temporality and collapses space" (6), and those artistic and cultural works which use memory as an essential way to re-imagine the future and to regain a strong temporal and spatial grounding of life and the imagination (*ibid.*). In fact, for Huyssen, the turn to memory responds to a desire to "anchor ourselves in a world characterised by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space" (18).

For Canclini, on the other hand, the most interesting cultural goods today are those that foreground the tensions between economic globalization and the politics of interculturality; that is to say, those that problematise the various tensions between regional, national and transnational alliances and treaties involving almost exclusively economic and financial measures (European Union, Mercosur and the Free Trade Treaties) and that affect mostly majors, big financial corporations and transnational businesses and companies; and those initiatives that seek to discuss, in culture, the dramas of *real* individuals, such as migrants and those who live at the margins of global development, and the confrontations between different ethnic communities, religious groups, sexual preferences and gender. The task of the cultural researcher is for García Canclini to ask what sorts of narratives can account for the recompositions that take place

between local and global levels in both groups (G/34-35). Similarly, it is the emergence of 'hybrid' cultural identities as a consequence both of the multicultural institution of modern nation-states and of the emergence of transnational forms of popular culture, as Tomlinson (1999) argues, that has become one of the most discussed aspects in cultural and post-colonial studies.

Thus, in what follows I shall attempt to explore in more detail some of these issues by making reference to some of Rodrigo Fresán's fictions. From *Argentine History*, the first book he published in 1991 to his latest novel, *Kensington Gardens*, published in 2005, Fresán's narrative inventions span the 1990s and the first half of the 2010s and as such provide an interesting ground for the sorts of national/transnational crossings I propose to explore.

From the national to the transnational: Rodrigo Fresán's *Argentine History*, *The Speed of Things* and *Kensington Gardens*.

No doubt part of what Rodrigo Fresán does as a writer can be related to the McOndo group especially in his exploration of Latin America identity as flexible and hybrid and of the impact of global modernity and mass/popular culture on the national and local imaginaries. However, his political agenda is broader in his inclusion of the politics of memory and defeat and in his concern with issues of national identity and trauma as his first book, *Historia Argentina* (1991) (henceforth *Argentine History*) shows. Like Fuguet and the other writers of the McOndo group, Fresán's narrative discourse is expressed from the onset as an individual's experience in a modern, globalized, world and is also quite far removed from any magical realist or *Macondian* stereotypical representation of Latin America as underdeveloped, rural or exotic. This, however, is not surprising in view of the Argentine literary excursions into fantasy rather than magical realism and of the avant-garde experiments of writers like Borges, Arlt, Cortázar, Puig, Piglia and Saer. Fresán's short-story for *McOndo*, entitled "Señales captadas en el corazón de una fiesta" (Signals Caught at the Heart of a Party), situates the male, first-person, homosexual protagonist at the heart of a party and utilises this context to develop the themes of AIDS and of individual memory, grief and loss. As Huyssen argues, in the 1990s memory discourse that focused on the personal --on testimony, memoir, subjectivity, traumatic memory-- many times merged with the discourses of AIDS, family violence, child abuse, and recovered memory syndrome as the dark underside to neoliberal triumphalism (8).

At the same time, in countries like Argentina and Chile, other traumas of a more collective and political nature began to be debated in the public arena. In these cases, as Huyssen argues, public memory converged with human rights activism, truth commissions, and juridical proceedings as groups of people (such as the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina) were trying to come to terms with a history of violence suffered not long ago. In this context, the creation of cultural artifacts that dealt with memory became essential not only as a means to revitalise the memory of the past but also to accompany in culture the human rights battle that those groups were fighting in the public sphere. It is here, therefore, that Fresán's stories in *Argentine History* add another dimension to the McOndo narratives, one that is more explicitly politically committed and more oriented to the concept of nation and national history in the sociopolitical context of postdictatorship Argentina.

In fact, Fresán's works were created among the paradoxes and tensions involved in the transit from the modern national state to the global market ushered in by the violence of the *Proceso*. Whilst *Argentine History* is still very much about the active remembering of some of the events that led the national socialist projects to waste, some of the books that Fresán wrote later on, such as *Vidas de Santos* (1993) (The Lives of Saints), *Trabajos Manuales* (1994) (The Craft of Writing), *Esperanto* (1995) and *La Velocidad de las Cosas* (1998) (henceforth *The Speed of Things*), seem to be increasingly concerned with thematising the processes of reading and writing, memory, mourning and defeat, and what Fresán has called 'the external perspective' or the 'perspective from abroad.' In Fresán's case, this latter theme has taken the form of a deterritorialisation of the narrative that has increasingly taken its first person narrators from the 'local' urban settings of Buenos Aires to other, non-specified places and even to the 'non-places' identified by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1995). These 'non-places' include in Fresán's fictions not only the sites of global modernity listed by Augé, such as airports, planes, boats, shopping malls, highways and hotels, but also, and increasingly, writing or textuality as an ultimate site in itself. As the books become increasingly self-reflexive, the impossibility of telling a coherent story, with a carefully thought-out plot and psychologically-defined or developed characters becomes more and more evident.

Whereas in *Argentine History* the stories are spun from the debris or remnants of past historical catastrophes, in the later books such as *Mantra* (2001) and *Jardines de Kensington* (2003) (henceforth *Kensington Gardens*), the concern is less with those specific remnants of Argentine history and more with writing and the themes of memory and death in general. Although Argentine identity is still an important theme in the books that follow *Argentine History*, this theme is explored in an increasingly transnationalised world as if the first person narrative voices were trying to see Argentina and Argentineans from 'the outside'. The theme of an external perspective that would allow the narrative voice to understand history and Argentine identity is, at the same time, always directly linked to two other main themes: writing as a craft and a never-ending 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988) process and the status of representation in a world that has become increasingly textualised or mediated by narrative and language.

The gradual but unstoppable change that took place in Argentina from the modern nation-state to the post-state market is often reflected in the way places and sites are portrayed in the stories. In *The Speed of Things* (1998), for example, the narrator of the first part (entitled "Notes for a Reader's Theory") claims to be sailing aboard a ship of unknown flag, named the *SS Neptuno* but which the narrator insists in calling *the Palestine Maid*. The names given to the ship have already been used in the first and other stories of *Argentine History* and reappear in the following six books Fresán has written (with the sole exception of his latest book, *Kensington Gardens*) thereby establishing an intratextual network of echoes and recurrences within Fresán's *oeuvre*. Being at sea, claims the narrator of "Notes," allows one to feel outside and far from everything (16).² Far from the Internet, the narrator is writing 'all of this' (the deictic actually pointing to the simultaneous present of the reading/writing time/space) in ink and paper in the 'small but infinite' notebook that he found by chance on a deck chair of the ship. The metaphor of infinity represented by the little notebook is an emblem of the status writing has acquired for Fresán as a writer, for whom life has become textualised.

Fresán's books also show a preference for first-person narrative voices: young, usually male writers caught in the process of *becoming* writers and always drifting in space. Space, thus, provides the semiotic code into which life and experience can be translated: for the narrator of "Notes for a reader's theory" of *The Speed of Things*, the body is "like a map, a no end of graphs and figures [...] yes, the body just as seen in those photos taken from up high --brown, and green and blue-- that are then used to draw maps" (18), literature "is a double-lane street" (21) and some fictions, as the years go by, "may become con-fused in the routes of the truthful" (21). The role of the true writer is "to stand by a corner in a road, hidden behind a sign, [...] and determine how long it takes exactly for a life to become a story and for a person to metamorphose into a character" (22). This place is for the narrator always located "abroad" or "outside" (22). "Abroad" is "an open map where it is only too easy to get lost only for the pleasure of finding oneself again" (22), it is that "route along which I --a last call passenger shaking the water off his passport in piers and airports-- have gone chasing many a theory" (22). The references are also sometimes explicitly intertextual like when the narrator recalls the lines that L.P. Hartley quotes from David Lowenthal in *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there. I think he was right" (22). The conception of history that the book explores is one then that has become spatialised and that is felt to be boundless for "no thought is more absurd and arrogant than the idea that a (hi)story concludes when you finish telling it. No, history keeps on moving encouraged by the secret ambition of becoming once again a life" (22). These self-reflexive ruminations lead the narrator to open a little black notebook where he begins to read the story of 'The Argentinean':

The Argentinean stopped reading as the plane started crowding with Argentineans eager to disappear in Miami [...] he saw them get onto the plane slowly, without hurrying, as if the plane belonged to each and everyone of them. How to recognise a fellow Argentinean on the air?, he thought. Easy. Very easy. The Argentineans are all those who immediately stand up and start rambling along the plane's aisles, driven by the impulse of an almost Pavlovian reflex, the moment the Fasten your Seatbelts sign comes on. The Argentineans are the ones who smoke in the non-smoking area. [...]The Argentineans are the ones who cannot stop thinking about the duty free shops as if they were one of the most extraordinary wings of the Louvre. The Argentineans are those who stand in front of everything and everyone, with arms akimbo as if they were inspecting their own personal troops. The Argentinean watched the galloping of a pack of blonde polo players' wives riding to Miami after having ridden around London or Sydney [...]

I stop reading and here she comes and though she does not look much like a polo player's wife, it does not

matter. I will find the way to make her look like one soon enough, there is no time to edit her a piacere. This is no more than the theory of a story. [...] pages that can be read diagonally, an unassembled film in which this person gathers speed without even noticing, until she reaches the speed of things that allows her to become one of my characters. (LVC, 24-26) (Change in typefaces as in original text).

As 'The Argentinean' is observing all of this aboard a plane and thinking of writing it all down in his little black notebook, the narrator is reading this from another little black notebook he had found on one of the ship's deck chairs. The mise-en-abyme effect of such passages disembodies the narrative voice and is a further move in the direction of the deterritorialisation of narrative associated with postmodernism's upsetting of stable identities. As the narrating voice migrates from one assemblage to the next, the distinctions between narrators and characters becomes increasingly blurred. This textual strategy allows for a con-fusion between fictional levels (as is the transposition of the polo player's wife from the story of 'the Argentinean' to the story of the main narrator). It is as if elements like these (the little black leather notebook, the characters) 'migrated' from one fictional assemblage into the other, moving laterally across narrative fragments.

These multiple reflections across fragments combine with another textual strategy: the figure of the 'nomad' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) expressed as a deterritorialised narrative voice that is always on the move, be it *geographically* aboard a ship, a plane, or on the road or, *figuratively*, as the narrative voice mutates into other narrators across assemblages, stories, and episodes or parts in the book. To a large extent, this extreme nomadism determines a rhizomatic structure of narrative in which each fragment is at some point diverted across a number of lateral paths shifting, for example, from the narrator aboard the *SSNeptuno*, to the Argentinean aboard the plane, to the story of the polo player's wife and so forth. These 'reterritorialisations' are, however, brief and elusive, since the narrative voice soon flees to another assemblage or lateral crossing. The repetition of characters (such as the polo player's wife), narrative echoes (the *SSNeptuno* and *The Palestine Maid*), and objects (the little black notebook) are thus textual strategies for making a narrative multiplicity grow whilst at the same time providing for interconnecting threads. This is the method by which a narrative assemblage metamorphoses into another lateral narrative episode. Each of these parallel micro-fictions then explores different aspects of Argentine identity or else engages in meditations on the processes of reading and writing and the nature of representation and memory.

The lateral movements across segments thus embody in narrative the modernist and postmodernist move away from a linear, logical sequence in time (and thereby a rejection of the classic unities of teleological, linear narratives), and an approximation to the opposite principles of multiplicity, simultaneity and flow in space (as seen in the fluid passages from one segment to another). In the passage quoted above, this fluid crossing over of narratives is also graphically indicated by the change in typefaces and by a certain degree of self-reflexivity of the narrator who is aware of 'pages that can be read diagonally', like 'an unassembled film.' These textual procedures appear in several of Fresán's works and it is precisely this horizontal proliferation and recycling of places, narrative voices and motifs that creates an effect of a narrative 'mapping,' fluidity and mobility.

The notion of narrative and cultural deterritorialisation is thus useful to explore Fresán's narratives in two senses: firstly, as a way to refer to the "broad transformations in the place-culture relationship in the context of global modernity" (Tomlinson 106-07), and, in particular, to those relations that refer to the dissolution of any 'natural' links between cultural experience and territorial location (García Canclini 1995:229) and secondly, to explore the metamorphoses of the narrative voice as 'a body without organs' (Deleuze and Guattari 4), that is to say, as a narrative voice that cannot be fixed or attached to any one subjectivity or 'character.' In the first sense of deterritorialisation, the term makes it clear that the globalization of mundane experience through the media and communications technologies, international travel (including expatriation and exile), and mass marketed products ('international' food, clothes, music, etc.) have made a stable sense of a 'local' cultural identity (including national identity) increasingly difficult to maintain. This process by which "our daily lives become more and more interwoven with, and penetrated by, influences and experiences that have their origins far away" (Tomlinson 113) is one of the main aspects of a cultural deterritorialisation expressed in Fresán's narratives through the incorporation of the 'non-places' of global modernity and through a perception of the Argentine 'local' culture as intersected by a multiplicity of other cultures (especially the American and the European). This is also expressed in the narrative through the recycling of Western culture by means of

quotation, parody and pastiche, expressed not only in the texts themselves but also in the paratext in epigraphs and acknowledgements notes. These textual strategies connect Fresán's narratives to that aspect of deterritorialisation identified by Tomlinson as a "lifting out of locality that occurs through the intertextual realm of the imagination" (119).

The second sense of deterritorialisation I have employed is connected to Deleuze and Guattari's notions of the rhizome and the nomad (1988). Within this framework, the shifts and changes in narrative voice (e.g. from the Argentine in the *SS Neptuno* to the Argentine aboard the plane) constitute a nomadic self whose identity cannot be fixed into any one character as it leaves us 'with nothing more than a name [in this case 'the Argentinean'] as the trace of an intensity' (Deleuze and Guattari 4, parenthetical remarks mine). Throughout the stories and fragments the multiple narrative voices break away from all rigid constructions of identity and subjectivity by disorganising or disseminating the narrative structure across a number of horizontal multiple segments interconnected through repeated motifs, echoes and elements. The rhizome is thus Deleuze and Guattari's term for a deterritorialised movement away from 'arborescent,' centred, or hierarchical conceptual systems. Rhizomatic thought, and by extension, rhizomatic modes of narrative, thus tend to spread out horizontally pluralising, multiplying, and disseminating the narrative's elements and representing reality (and identity) as dynamic, changing, and heterogeneous. Each narrative assemblage thus becomes a 'line of flight,' that is, a full fledged deterritorialising movement away from fixed or rigid identities in which the subject is disseminated in the process of becoming multiple (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). As Douglas and Kellner explain, for Deleuze and Guattari "rhizomes are non-hierarchical systems of deterritorialised lines that connect with other lines in random, unregulated relationships" (1991:99). This is expressed in the narrative by creating transversal communications between the fragments and through the compilation of multiple 'beginnings' and 'endings,' 'false starts,' and myriad digressions scattered in the text.

Thus, in the framework of this paper, these two notions of deterritorialisation (one cultural and related to global modernity, the other enunciative and connected to the multiplicity of identity) are seen as complementing each other, both 'commenting' as it were on two different aspects of these narratives: the contextual (global modernity) and the textual (rhizomatic narrative forms). In terms of the political commitment that García Canclini demands of modern hybrid narratives, the destabilization of fixed notions of identity (or of 'Argentineness') and the inescapability of global modernity cannot be dissociated in *Argentine History* and in *The Speed of Things* from the postdictatorial context of the aesthetic of memory, mourning and defeat (see Avelar 1999). In this sense, unlike Deleuze and Guattari's 'purely affirmative' notion of desire (Best and Kellner 101), the lines of flight in Fresán's books express a more Foucauldian notion of desire as negativity, that is, as the desire to resist the homogenizing force of a criminal, repressive State that in the 1970s dictated and normalized Argentine identity and reality.

Fresán's latest novel, however, is a radical change from all his previous narratives. *Kensington Gardens*, (2003; English translation by Natasha Wimmer, 2005), is almost wholly located in London (except when the narrative briefly moves to Scotland). No other book by Fresán is as respectful of unity of place as this one and, unlike previous works, this work can be classified without hesitation as a novel. It is a long way from all the previous compositional hybrids Fresán has written both thematically and in terms of form. Most of the movements in the novel are to and fro in time as the narratives of Peter Hook and James Matthew Barrie are intertwined in a tale that shifts from contemporary London to Victorian England to the 'swinging sixties'. Thus, although up until *Kensington Gardens* his narratives had been often located in imaginary places (Sad Songs, the *SS Neptuno*, the *Palestine Maid*), in Buenos Aires or other Argentine places or else, in 'non-places' like hotels and airports; *Kensington Gardens*, by contrast, takes place from beginning to end in London. The change of setting has coincided with Fresán's first book to be translated into English and with its release both in the UK (Faber and Faber) and in the United States (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux). In the acknowledgements note to *Kensington Gardens* and in an interview with Jonathan Lethem, Fresán has said that the idea for a narrative involving Peter Pan and the life of James Mathew Barrie came to him one day after watching a TV documentary about the life and works of the writer. (KG, p.412; Lethem_Fresán, 2006).³ The note also makes clear that Fresán has never been to London and that most of his knowledge about the city came from other books which are acknowledged at length in the note. Proper names, places and other English cultural references are incorporated into the text through exhaustive listing and cataloguing. The narrative thus seems bent on proving that a Latin American writer need not write about Latin American topics in order to succeed in the market as the

overall commendatory review blurbs in the UK and the United States demonstrate.⁴

In terms of what happened to the theme of national identity, Argentina and the historical chronicle, these have all disappeared and their place has been taken by a kind of book-inspired cosmopolitanism. At the end of the book, in the note, Fresán admits his ignorance of London (in fact at the time of writing *KG* he had never been there) and acknowledges his indebtedness to the bibliographical sources he used to recreate the life and history of the city, of James Matthew Barrie and of the Llewellyn Davies family. This is a purer level of fabulation and intertextuality than that found in any of his previous works and is seen by Fresán as a virtue in that it has allowed him to “better achieve a city of vague outline matching the elusive character of the narrator (*KG*, 409)”. The book does not attempt to establish any sort of intimate connections with experience or reality, as Fresán text is a compilation and imaginative rewriting of all the other texts he has read on the subject. Although the connections between a book like *Argentine History* and *Kensington Gardens* are hard to figure out, the themes of death or loss, memory and defeat are central to both works. But unlike *Argentine History*, *Kensington Gardens* is not concerned with national history or national identity or with the historical chronicle. In the first sections the novel suggests an analogy between the untimely death of James Matthew Barrie’s elder brother and Peter Hook’s younger brother and the defeat (or figurative death) of the utopian dreams that swept London in the 1960s: both die prematurely or before their potential can fully develop, as it were, leaving the parents (and the nation) to mourn. But beyond this level of comparison (a rather pastiche or clichéd reconstruction one at that) the narrative’s take on memory and defeat of the swinging 60s in London is wholly taken from Fresán’s readings of other books. His account of London in the Victorian era and in the 1960s is thus wholly *textual* in nature and to a great degree *apolitical* in its total detachment from reality and experience.

Thus, the previous interface reality/fiction that was seen in his use of the historical chronicle in *Argentine History* is here replaced by a fiction/fiction one that only acknowledges other texts as their only reality. Nor does the novel work as an allegory either. Losing the connections between the historical chronicle and social experience (individual and collective), means that the political significance of the novel (in terms of its representation of the utopian 60s) is to a great extent lost as well. The last novel written by Fresán is, in this sense, a move away from the aesthetic of mourning, memory and defeat of *Argentine History* and as such does not offer much in the way of a politicised art. In an interview in 2003, Fresán stated:

I don't criticise those writers who write about their city, their neighbourhood....I think it's all right that there should be such territorially-minded authors; so deeply national. But this is not my case [...] Maybe the thing is that I am 40 years old and these past 40 years in Argentina have only shown an atomised country. If I feel heir to an Argentine tradition, that it is no doubt the cosmopolitan one. (2003, Prensas: ICCL, my translation)⁵

Fresán thus reasserts Borges’s ideas in “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” but recontextualising them in the current epoch of global modernity, where the Argentine tradition is reinterpreted in the light of the cosmopolitanism and the cultural hybridity of market capitalism. Fresán’s distanciation with regard to Argentine identity has become deeper since he moved to Barcelona in 1999. As he has said:

A writer spends much of his life in other countries: the countries of the books he reads and the country of the books he writes. There is an interesting contradiction in the practice of literature: it is the most sedentary craft there is [...] and, at the same time, the most nomad activity of all. [...] I was born Argentinean and I hope to die a writer. The only true homeland is our library.” (2005, my translation)⁶

In *Mantra* and *Kensington Gardens*, the narrative has moved further and further away from Argentina and although the themes of memory and defeat continue to provide material for his fictions, these are no longer related to the Argentine historical past and to the cultural politics of mourning, memory and defeat that continues with so much force today in Argentina. In *Argentine History*, *Lives of Saints*, *The Craft of Writing*, *Esperanto* and *The Speed of Things*, Fresán’s narrative was innovative and experimental but still very much concerned with local or national issues that became increasingly deterritorialised and hybridised with the symbolic imaginaries of global modernity. In these novels, the location was often that of Argentina, Buenos Aires, sometimes that of Sad Songs as an emotional location, and increasingly, the various ‘non-places’ of global modernity such as ships, boats, shopping malls, airports, hotels and highways in the last years of the second millennium. In this conjunction of local and foreign places and of various symbolic imaginaries, the narratives expressed a cultural ambiguity or hybridity that is seen to be the landmark of Latin American cultural identity today. His last two novels, however, move to specific

foreign sites (Distrito Federal, Mexico in *Mantra*; and London, in *Kensington Gardens*) and it is as if Fresán's own change of location has entailed a total severance with Argentina and the historical past. Without this anchoring in Argentine -or another material history in the case of *Kensington Gardens*-- his texts have become little more than fabricating artifices lacking the kinds of links between fiction and life of previous books. This amounts to a description of a textualist postmodernism as against the historiographic version of earlier work --an odd move in terms of the current socio-political context. As Peter Hook says in *KG*: "there is nothing better than contemplating the way fiction works when you are trying to flee reality" (19).⁷ The question remains, however: why would the writer want to flee reality and flee his country?

In an essay entitled "Apuntes para una teoría del Yin y el Yang: Las Mujeres en Bioy Casares, la muerte en Borges" (Notes toward a theory of Yin and Yang: Women in Bioy Casares and death in Borges), Rodrigo Fresán speaks about the Argentinean 'tradition' of going abroad:

Borges's death was and will always be a truly Argentinean death. That is, Borges went to die abroad. And abroad is probably the most Argentinean place of all [...]. Borges, too, is irrefutable evidence that the advantages of being an Argentinean and being a writer have to do with the idea that one can become a writer and an Argentinean anywhere in the world. Because Argentina, like death, is everywhere and nowhere. Argentina was a stillborn country and --since then-- it inhabits a limbo-map where all those unchristened dead countries go, and where everything mixes and nothing is one thing. [...] (2004, my translation).⁸

As it so often happens in Argentine letters Borges's role at the centre of the Argentine canon always implies in one way or another a debate on the ambiguity of Argentine cultural identity. Increasingly, for Fresán, this identification of the Argentine writer with 'abroad' (i.e. Europe) has meant a deterritorialisation of the narrative and a move away not only from the locations of Argentina (and of Buenos Aires, in particular) but also, and perhaps more regrettably, of Argentine history itself. And, on the evidence of *Kensington Gardens*, no alternative European history beyond what is to be found in other books. Thus, although the 'exile' has tended to write about the homeland, and the 'cosmopolitan' is said to be at home in many countries, Fresán, by contrast, seems rather to be 'homeless.' Still, the question remains: why this postmodernism of the textual surface? It might be, perhaps, that this novel is a symptom of what the loss of a historical anchorage or more pointedly, of political intent, comes to mean in the era of global capital. The novel is, after all, as is its author, a 'product' of its historical moment. In any case, it is clear that the debates on national/transnational cultural crossings have begun to raise new questions and challenges in the field of literature not so easily answerable by the previous local/foreign dichotomy.

Notes

¹ McOndo, *Una Antología de Nueva Literatura Hispanoamericana*. Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez (eds.). Barcelona: Grijalbo/Mondadori, 1996. The collection includes three stories from Mexico, Argentina and Spain, two stories from Chile and one story from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Ecuador and Peru.

² All Spanish references and quotations are from the Tusquets edition of Rodrigo Fresán's *La Velocidad de las Cosas* (1998) (The Speed of Things). All translations are my own.

³ PEN American Center, *Benetton Talks: Young Writers Series*. MP3 interview, Jonathan Lethem and Rodrigo Fresán, 2006.

⁴ See for example the reviews and blurbs in <http://www.holtzbrinckpublishers.com/academic/book>; in *The Guardian*, Saturday, July 1st, 2006 at: <http://books.guardian.co.uk>; and in *The Independent*, review by Michael Eade, September 1st, 2005. Last retrieved on 26.09.06; and in *The Independent*, September 1st, 2005 at: <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews>.

⁵ Interview to Rodrigo Fresán by Natália Frenández, Departament de Premsa, ICCI, Càtedra Casa de las

Américas, l' Institut Català de Cooperació Iberoamericana, May 2003. Retrieved from www.americat.net/docs/entrevistas/rodrigo_fresan.doc.

⁶ Quotation taken from "Rodrigo Fresán: epifanías de un narrador," interview by Pablo Montanaro, *Rio Negro* newspaper, Saturday 9th April 2005, at: http://rionegro.com.ar/suple_cultura.

⁷ The quotation is from Natasha Wimmer's translation of *Kensington Gardens*, 2005, Faber and Faber, London.

⁸ The "Notes" was a lecture Fresán gave for the Cátedra de las Américas in Barcelona compiled in *Cuadernos de la Cátedra de las Américas No 1*, Ramón Gonzalez (ed.), Barcelona: Institut Català de Cooperació Iberoamericana 2004, at: www.americat.net/docs/biblioteca/catedra.

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