Genoa as Lived and Imagined Social Space in the Work of Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

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Abstract: Drawing on the concepts of 'superdiversity' and 'thirdspace' this article analyses the work of Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer as a description of a specific Italian city, i.e. Genoa. The main claim is that this in literature evoked city has its unique history and social stratification but is representative as well for the current European space. Literary fiction in its ambiguity and polyphony confronts us with real circumstances, therefore fiction provides social knowledge and can be relevantly used in urban studies.

Keywords: superdiversity / superdiversiteit, 'thirdspace', fiction / fictie, realism / realisme, Europe / Europa, Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

Introduction

Literature and urban space have an intriguing and age-old connection.[1] In many novels, particularly those written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, real cities are represented: protagonists stroll through the city streets of Vienna, Paris or Berlin; people (characters and historical figures) meet in cafés; and differences in class status, neighbourhoods, housing and life experiences are depicted. The work of Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, Stefan Zweig, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre and others are exemplary in this regard. We could argue that many of these city novels provide historical knowledge on cities and urban life, or as Peter Brooks recently claimed, that there is an 'exceptional role for the novel in the writing and understanding of history: the novel as truer to grasping the meaning of historical action than what usually passes as history'.[2]

Since the new millennium, quite some urban novels have been written and can be added to the existing corpus of city literature: for instance, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2004) or *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) on migrant families in London; Mathias Enard's *Street of Thieves* (2012), about a young Moroccan man living illegally in Barcelona and resisting the lure of jihadism; and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (2015), about asylum seekers encountering permanent residents in Berlin. All these novels confront us with concrete cities and places—that is, London, Barcelona and Berlin—and with actual social issues, as well as with imagined lives and experiences. In these novels migration and mobility are thematised, and as such this literature could be characterised as 'migrant literature' under the definition used by Rosemarie Buikema: 'migrant literature is (…) the contemporary literary writing in which the politics of location and/or dislocation is central to the narrative'. This literature 'has a specific way of thematising and deconstructing the traditional meaning of the private and the public, the near and the far, the past and the future'.[3]

Current literature on urban spaces, however, often entails more than just the migrant theme as a social issue, in that it provides musings on reality, concreteness, the everyday and on the powerful literary (transforming) gaze. Indeed, current literature on cities offers 'urban imaginaries' as the cognitive and at the same time somatic image that we carry within us of the places where we live, work and play.[4] The point is that no real city can ever be grasped in its present or past totality by any single person, as Andreas Huyssen claimed, and that is why literature on urban space has a particular significance and potential. Literature demonstrates how reality and imagination are intertwined and cannot be separated.

[1] See: Bart Keunen, *De verbeelding van de Grootstad, Stads en wereldbeelden in het proza van de moderniteit* (Brussels: VUP Press, 2000); Andreas Huyssen, ed., *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Winfried Nerdinger, ed., *Architektur wie sie im Büche steht, Fiktieve Bauten und Städte in der Literatur* (Munich: Verlag Anton Puset, 2007); Kevin R. McNamara, *The Cambridge Companion to The City in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Sander Bax, Pascal Gielen and Bram Ieven, ed., *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015).

[2] Peter Brooks, *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris: The Story of a Friendship, a Novel, and a Terrible Year* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), p. xix–xx.

[3] Rosemarie Buikema, 'A Poetics of Home: On a Narrative Voice and the Deconstruction of Home in Migrant Literature', in *Migrant Cartographies, New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*, ed. Sandra Ponzanesi and Daniela Merolla (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 177.

[4] Huyssen, p. 3.

In this article this significance will be illustrated through an analysis of the work of Dutch literary author Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer (b. 1968), who takes the reader to the concrete and simultaneously fabulated city of Genoa. Pfeijffer, who has been living in the Italian city for over eight years, represents the place in novels entitled *La Superba* (2013) and *Brieven uit Genua* [*Letters from Genoa*] (2016), and in poetry, *Idyllen* (2015). He also posted many pictures of Genoa scenes on Instagram using hashtags such as #urbanexploration, #storyofthestreet and #citywalk.[5] Besides, Pfeijffer performed the role of host in the television documentary *Via Genua*, aired on Dutch Public television in January and February 2017. In this three-episode series, the author passes through the historical centre of the city, meeting various people and speaking to them about their everyday lives and routines. His voice-over reads parts of his novel, addressing the reader and audience as 'my friend'.

Novels, poems, photography and a television series focussing on the everyday reality of a specific European city are interconnected artefacts posing several questions: How does a (literary) singular impression evoke general urban recognition? How do the *micro storia* of characters in the street stand for a macro narrative on new cultural spaces? How can the local historically loaded context be re-entextualized in the broader transforming European context? To answer these questions, I will after a short introduction on the characterisation of the European city employ two interdisciplinary notions that are relevant in urban studies, but that can also be connected to literary data: superdiversity and thirdspace. I will then elaborate these notions and subsequently implement them in a brief close reading of the texts chosen as case study. In the concluding section, it will be argued that as a consequence of applying these notions literary studies is opened up to urban geography and can illuminate current social and cultural transformations of European cities.

The European City

Before elaborating on the theoretical notions superdiversity and thirdspace, I will briefly pay attention to the idea of the European city. As Walter Matznetter and Robert Musil have convincingly contended, there is a difference between the notion of the global city as shaped by finance and specialised service industries, and the European city defined by historical emergence and nation-based public institutions.[6] Global network cities such as Tokyo, New York and London demonstrate high-income gentrification in residential and commercial settings and the downgrading of the manufacturing sector[7] and can be contrasted with the European city characterised as morphogenetic:

> The physical traces of one or two millennia of urban development contribute to an urban morphology that is considered unique. Street networks and plot layout often predate industrialisation, skylines are tamed by conservative building codes and preservation orders,

[5] See: www.instagram.com/iljaleonardpfeijffer, (accessed 15 October 2019). Most of the photographs are scenes from Genoa, but there are also pictures of Leiden and London.

[6] Walter Matznetter and Robert Musil, 'The European City in the Age of Globalisation', *Belgeo Revue belge de géographie* 1, (2012): p. 1–2.

[7] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 9.

> and housing is dominated by rented apartments, mixed with offices and workshops on a small scale. In the 20th century, variants of welfare regimes added their imprint on European cities: public utilities, public transport, public and social housing, garden cities and green belts are more frequent here than in other regions of the world.[8]

Older buildings and diverse architectural styles affect the lives of inhabitants of the European city, making history present, and public and private spaces permeable. European cities are considered typical because of their scale, size and relative stability. In recent decades, many of these cities have benefitted from European integration and consequently from being branded as a 'Eurocity'. Medium-size cities such as Utrecht, Coimbra, Brno, Lyon or Zaragoza can be used as an example here.[9] Evidently, this brand is a myth contributing to marketing and tourism.

This rather optimistic perspective on European cities, however, does not take into account that today cities are changing and expanding rapidly due to migration and mobility. The enlargement is not always done in a subtle way. Sociologist Richard Sennett referred to the 'brittle city', which is no longer a sociable space: 'today's ways of building cities—segregating functions, homogenising population, pre-empting through zoning and regulation of the meaning of place—fail to provide communities the time and space needed for growth'.[10] The *banlieues* in Paris and Brussels are representative of this zoning and segregation. In the French capital, the *Périphérique* ring road cuts the wealthy historical and tourism-loaded centre off from the working-class suburbs. Another intricate phenomenon is that cities are becoming more smart or digital, and as such 'spaces of flow'. As Manuel Castells argued in the early 1990s: 'The transformation of European cities is inseparable from a deeper structural transformation that affects urban forms and processes in advanced societies: the coming of the informational city'.[11]

It is in this context of new transformations in European cities, that I examine an exemplary literary oeuvre in which the everyday reality of a historical city-centre is represented and thought-through. Reality, obviously, is not fixed facts or the state of things, it is not the city map as such, but a dynamic and ongoing experience continuously asking for scrutiny and interpretation. Reality is factual (that is: the material infrastructure) and imaginary. 'One can tell a true story in a hundred ways without disturbing the reality', Pfeijffer writes in one of his letters from Genoa. 'One can only do justice to reality by telling about it', he adds.[12] The point, evidently, is that literature illuminates the experience of everydayness in a real city by *transposing* it and thereby providing insights into how various people interact and live together.

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[8] Matznetter and Musil, 'The European City in the Age of Globalisation', p. 21.

[9] See: http://eurocities.eu (accessed 15 October 2019).

[10] Richard Sennett, 'The Open City', *LSECities* (November 2006), WEB. See: https://lsecities.net/media/objects/articles/the-open-city/en-gb/ (accessed 15 October 2019).

[11] Manuel Castells, 'European Cities, the Informational Society, and the Global Economy', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 84, no. 4 (1993): p. 253.

[12] All translations are by the author of this article (Heynders). 'Je kunt elk waargebeurd verhaal op honderden manieren vertellen zonder de werkelijkheid geweld aan te doen. Je kunt de werkelijkheid alleen recht doen door haar te vertellen'. Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2016), p. 313.

Superdiversity and Thirdspace

Before discussing Pfeijffer's work as paragon of contemporary literary texts in which real cities are presented, I will expand on two interdisciplinary concepts to be used as a framework for analysing urban experiences: superdiversity and thirdspace. Superdiversity is a notion developed in sociolinguistics and anthropology that focuses on differences (economic or class status, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, legal status, country of origin and so on) in speech and as such on new formations of social life.[13] These new articulations are related to the global and digital world: people are thrown together and have to talk to each other and live together, but often encounters are only superficial, which results in the stereotyping or stigmatization of the other.[14] Superdiversity implies the multiplication of social categories under specific local conditions, and as such has become a common feature of urban experience in cities all over Europe.[15] The notion has developed relevancy to a wide range of post-structuralist and post-colonial research into the potential and limits of human cultural creativity and social renewal.[16]

Concepts from cultural studies have been recently added to the research on superdiverse language use to sharpen ideas on agency and creativity. Piia Varis[17] argues that superdiversity focuses on conjunctures as the multiple levels, forces and speeds of movement, and on 'structures of feeling'—the notion is taken from Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977)—as 'social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (…) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies'.[18] According to Varis, structures of feeling help us to focus on individuals and how they experience the complex social environment they are in. Sociolinguistic superdiversity, then, can be implemented in a broader range of societal and cultural research into the complexity and dynamics of time, urban space and meaning.

This brings me to the second notion that I will use as a framework in my analysis: thirdspace. This notion was developed by American urban geographer Edward Soja, who—in line with the theories of French social philosopher Henri Lefebvre—distinguished in the context of urban analysis three related existential dimensions: spatiality, historicality and sociality. Soja's idea is that all human beings position themselves in these correlated dimensions, even though since the Enlightenment the analyses of time and class (historicality and sociality) have always been preferred over the analysis of space (spatiality). Ties, however, between the concrete materiality of spatial infrastructures and historical and current ideas of space have to be reconsidered and

[13] See: S. Vertovec, 'Super-Diversity and its Implications, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): p. 1024–54.

[14] Kim Knott, 'Walls and Other Unremarkable Boundaries in South London: Impenetrable Infrastructures or Portals of Time. Space and Cultural Difference?' *New Diversities* 17, no. 2 (2015): p. 15-34.

[15] Marian Burchardt and Stefan Höhne, 'The Infrastructures of Diversity: Materiality and Culture in Urban Space, An Introduction', *New Diversities* 17, no. 2 (2015): p. 4.

[16] Karel Arnaut, Martha Sif Karrebaek and Max Spotti, eds, *Engaging Superdiversity, Recombining Spaces, Times and Language Practices* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017).

[17] Piia Varis, Superdiverse Times and Places: Media, Mobility, Conjunctures and Structures of Feeling. In: Karel Arnaut et al (eds.), *Engaging Superdiversity, Recombining Spaces, Times and Language Practices* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017) p. 25-46.

[18] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

negotiated. That is why Soja introduces the term thirdspace as an in-between or hybrid space, where real and imaginary features produce together a new space experience. The term thirdspace means *being-in-the-beyond*, and illuminates the dynamic and fluidness of the production and understanding of space. This becomes clear when Soja provides the example of his experience of living in the historical centre of Amsterdam, where he realised that the past and present continuously intersect:

> The past is omnipresent in its narrow nooks and odd-angled passageways, its flower-potted corners and unscreened windows that both open and close to the views outside. Everyday life inside becomes a crowded reminder of at least four rich centuries of urban geohistory being preserved on a scale and contemporary intensity that is unique (…). The prevailing atmosphere is not that of a museum, however, a fixed and dead immortalization of the city's culturally built environment.[19]

Amsterdam is a space that is historical and present, and consequently challenges specific forms of social behaviour: people move on bikes, sit (read, eat) on the street, open their windows to the street and so on. Soja observes how Amsterdam is a 'creative paradox', a sort of urban museum and at the same time a very lively place, with a 'flexible inflexibility' and much more freedom for pedestrians and cyclists than for automobiles. The city centre feels 'like an open public forum, a daily festival of spontaneous political and cultural ideas played at low key'.[20]

Superdiversity and thirdspace help us to understand social articulations and various time dimensions in rapidly changing urban spaces. We can use both notions as a framework when analysing how individuals move, live and experience (dis)location in European cities. Importantly, the two notions can be related to concepts such as heteroglossia and chronotope, both used by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. I would argue that heteroglossia fine-tunes superdiversity, in that the various ways of speaking and having a voice determine how people interact with each other. Chronotope, on the other hand, adjusts the notion of thirdspace, emphasising how space and timeframes can become fluid. Let me elaborate this further.

In 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' Bakhtin drew attention to the 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature'.[21] In literature, time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, while space becomes 'responsive to the movements of time, plot and history'.[22] In a novel there can be a 'simultaneous existence (…) of phenomena taken from widely separate periods of time'.[23] Chronotope points at the spatial and temporal embedding of human action. It makes narrative events concrete, but at the same time underlines the specific potential of literary mimesis.[24] To the Russian theorist the

[19] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), p. 285.

[20] Ibid., p. 297.

[21] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 84.

[22] Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*.

[23] Ibid., p. 85.

[24] 'It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers—the time of human

specific power of the novel is the amalgam of time/space touching on concreteness and abstraction, reality and imagination, the present and history. Even though Bakhtin did not provide a systematic theory, it becomes clear that chronotope can sinuously be related to heteroglossia. In the novel, Bakhtin explains, a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships in time and space can be acknowledged.

My claim is that when studying and analysing everyday urban activities in literature, superdiversity and thirdspace can be used as frames to illuminate representation and individual experience. The specific case study in this article will be the city of Genoa as evoked in the literary oeuvre of Dutch author Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. As I hope to make clear, in his work various dimensions (historicality, spatiality and sociality) can be distinguished, focussing on what characters and the narrator experience in urban space. Furthermore, the literary work illustrates specific voices and also the re-voicing of experiences. As such, the literary text provides insight into how humans interact in a specific urban space, as well as how fiction is grounded in a valuated and emotionally experienced world.

The Poetics of Place and the Concreteness of Fiction

In the historical centre of Genoa we can locate the Via di Pré running from the Piazza di Santa Fede to the Chiesa San Giovanni di Pré in the neighbourhood of the old harbour and the Museo di Palazzo Reale. Based on the description in Pfeijffer's novel *La Superba* and the television series *Via Genua*, we know that in the street there are halal butchers, fruit and vegetable shops with names in Arabic and the Wolof languages, mobile phone shops, African barbers, a bric-a-brac shop ruled by a Moroccan man with a disability, a flower shop, *chocolatier* and so on. At the end of the street transgender prostitutes have their rooms near an improvised mosque, which is often overcrowded so that people must pray on the pavement of the street. The Via di Pré can be characterised as the principal street in Pfeijffer's oeuvre; it is a route in the centre of Genoa, a path along the many stories of individuals, and an edge between the lives of the haves and have-nots. Via di Pré is a *leitmotif* in the work of the Dutch author: a reality on Google maps as well as a metaphor for writing literature and building an oeuvre. In the first episode of the television series Pfeijffer criticises his own typical behaviour as he realises that he has always loved the Via di Pré but normally did not stop there to really see what happens in the street. Accompanied by the television camera and quoting parts from his novel, he now zooms in on the details and the various stories of the different inhabitants and passers-by. Via di Pré is exciting and *carnivalesque*, the author claims, but it is an illusion to think that this is Italy or Europe; rather, 'this is Africa'.[25]

In 2013, Pfeijffer, writer, poet and former classical scholar at Leiden University, published his fourth novel: *La Superba* [The Superior One].[26] The title literally refers to the nickname of Genoa, and some commentators immediately took the book as an alternative travel guide for the

life, of historical time—that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas. (…) Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a centre for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel', Ibid., 250.

[25] See the opening words available at: www.vpro.nl/programmas/via-genua/kijk/afleveringen/2017/aflevering-1.html (accessed 15 October 2017).

[26] In 2014 the novel won the prestigious Dutch 'Libris Literatuurprijs'.

city. Fact is that the novel undermines as well as affirms the reality of the Italian city, evoking a play of concrete details, imagination and self-fabrication. The protagonist is Pfeijffer's alter-ego, a Dutch writer living in Genoa, who strolls around the labyrinthine city centre by day and night, observing the people in the streets and squares. He listens to stories, notes details, and imagines what is behind façades, smiles and words. He is particularly interested in newcomers, such as Rashid, the seller of roses on squares and terraces, or Donald Perrygrove Sinclair, an English professor who is permanently drunk, and Djiby, who is from Senegal and has travelled for weeks before arriving in the city. The author and I-narrator considers himself to be a newcomer in Genoa, after having left his job and reputation in the Netherlands.[27] Of course he is a prosperous migrant, who can afford a place to live and is not regarded an outcast, due to the fact that he earns money with his writing and carries a European passport. He also is, in the footsteps of poets such as P. B. Shelley or Lord Byron, the romantic genius, the writer who envisages becoming Italian and knows how to behave, *come si deve* as the Italians say.

Some events told in the narrative are evidently fiction, for instance when the narrator finds an amputated female leg encapsulated in net stockings and decides to take it home, where he has sexual fantasies about the body to which the leg belongs. Other events and scenes are (more) realistic and can be considered engaging descriptions of the actual circumstances in the city:

> From Via del Campo it is 200 metres to Africa. I walked through the Porta dei Vacca, crossed the street and was in Pré. Hundreds of internet points and mobile phone shops which had the width of a door were overcrowded with Kenyans and Senegalese. Meanwhile, their wives made money selling tinsel on the street, smartphone wallets, paper handkerchiefs, sink plungers, hand crafted elephants of tropical wood.[28]

Depictions such as this one underline the city as a superdiverse environment, in which various ways and standards of living, various signs and semiotic systems, and various languages, voices and narratives converge. It is, we could claim, the ideal habitat for a baroque writer interested in writing fiction and creating a life: 'It is about the mirror palace of fiction imitating fiction and that is then the real life'.[29]

Genoa, the age-old city and harbour, has always been the city of travel and dream, of departing to other places and continents, and of coming back from long journeys into other continents. It is a city of permanent and temporary residents, each of them with his own life story. The migrants from Africa often share stories of poverty, hunger and danger, in contrast with the life narrative of the narrator who left his safe, well-organized and decent homeland, just because it was too safe, organized and respectable. The narrator crossing the city has a sharp eye for social

[27] 'In het thuisland herkent iedereen mij en word ik dagelijks lastiggevallen voor een handtekening of een opinie. Hier niet. Ik heb mijn intrek genomen. Ik draag de sleutel bij me van een echt Genuees huis'. Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, *La Superba: Een roman* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2013), p. 55.

[28] 'Vanaf Via del Campo is het tweehonderd meter naar Afrika. Ik liep door de Porta dei Vacca, stak de weg over en was in Pré. Honderden internetpunten en belwinkels van nauwelijks een deur breed waren afgeladen met Kenianen en Senegalezen. Hun vrouwen verdienden intussen het geld door rinkelend klatergoud te verkopen op straat, telefoonhoesjes, papieren zakdoekjes, cd's, gootsteenontstoppers en handgesneden olifanten van tropisch hardhout'. Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, p. 47.

[29] 'Het gaat mij om het spiegelpaleis van fictie die fictie imiteert en dat dat welbeschouwd het ware leven is'. Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua*, p. 116.

diversity, for humour and sadness. He observes and gauges the social and historical layers of the city, the city as thirdspace, as for instance in the experience of the Campo Pisano:

> This place once was a sort of Abu Ghraib. Here the prisoners were locked up after the fleet and armies of Genoa La Superba had finally broken the power of archenemy Pisa. The curses of the beaten and humiliated Pisani still can be heard today. Symbols of Genoa's power are decorated in a mosaic of big stones. I am the only one here at this time of day. The green shutters of the houses are closed. The wine bar only opens tonight. Far away I hear a goat bleating or the sound of a ferry.[30]

Pfeijffer selects facts and details, observes and imagines. He polishes the truth until it radiates as fiction.[31] He accentuates that nothing is made up.[32] All that he describes takes place in the city, while the city is reality, imagination and memory. This could remind us of Italo Calvino's Venice in *Invisible Cities*.[33] It, obviously, also is an experience like the 'creative paradox' of Edward Soja: the past is omnipresent and still determines the nuances and feelings of social and cultural life of the city. People come from everywhere and take their stories (sociality) and memories (historicality) to the medieval city centre (spatiality), and all the narrator has to do, is to listen and to use his pencil. The novel is a *décor*, Pfeijffer conveys, and as such it exposes a world, just like decors appearing in other literary works: Tolstoy's Russia in *War and Peace*, or claustrophobic The Hague in the novels of Dutch author Louis Couperus. 'Each novel takes very much place somewhere. Even when the place is made up, the author depicts it with so many details, smells and colours, that it seems as if he was brought up there. If the reader after reading has the feeling of 'having been there', the book is good'.[34] Pfeijffers creates an assemblage of fact and fiction, present and past. He invents the *real* Genoa.

Frequently descriptions and observations are loaded with judgement and even ironical or clichéd perspectives: migrants are too naïve, tourists are stupid. 'In the neighbourhood Pré, where Rashid lives with the rest of Africa, each prospectless illegal buys with the first sixty euros he earned a fake Rolex with fake diamonds to start off as appearing decent in Europe'.[35] As such, migrants are in clear contrast with the tourists as 'inheritors of the Wirtschaftswunder' passing

[30] 'Deze plek was ooit een soort Abu Ghraib. Hier werden de krijgsgevangenen opgesloten nadat de vloot en legers van Genua La Superba uiteindelijk voorgoed de macht hadden gebroken van aartsvijand Pisa. De vervloekingen van de verslagen en vernederde Pisani klinken tot op de dag van vandaag door. Symbolen van de macht van Genua zijn met een mozaiek van grove kiezels aangebracht in het plaveisel. Ik ben de enige op dit uur van de dag. De groene luiken van de huizen zijn toe. De wijnbar gaat pas vanavond open. In de verte hoor ik een geit mekkeren of de stoomfluit van een veerboot'. Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, p. 39.

[31] Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua*, p. 324.

[32] Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua*, p. 579.

[33] See Odile Heynders, 'Cities & Signs: Rethinking Calvino's Urban Imaginaries', Sander Bax, Pascal Gielen, and Bram Ieven (eds.), *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere,* (Amsterdam: Valiz), p. 65-85.

[34] 'Elke goede roman speelt zich heel erg ergens af. Zelfs als die plek fictief is, beschrijft de schrijver hem in zoveel details, geuren en kleuren dat het lijkt alsof hij er is opgegroeid. Als de lezer na lectuur het gevoel heeft dat hij er is geweest, is het boek geslaagd.' Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua*, p. 558.

[35] 'In de wijk Pré, waar Rashid woont met de rest van Afrika, geeft elke kansloze illegaal de eerste zestig euro die hij verdient uit aan een nep-Rolex met imitatiediamanten om er in Europa om te beginnen een beetje fatsoenlijk bij te lopen'. Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, p. 34.

by in underwear. The narrator describes what he notices and regularly addresses himself with his own name: 'Every Moroccan thinks that one can automatically become rich in Europe. But I have seen the truth, Ilja. I have seen the truth'.[36] Sometimes 'my friend' is mentioned, which could be interpreted as speaking to the reader, or to a self as an explicit alter-ego. In this particular passage, the name intentionally emphasises the composition of storytelling, underlining the artificial construction of the narrative. The story is full of mirrors and labyrinths, just like the narrow streets in Genoa are circling, intertwining, disappearing.

Via Genua: A Television Documentary

There is a strong link between the novel *La Superba* and the television series aired by the VPRO in the winter of 2017. The documentary consists of three episodes of about forty-four minutes duration: 1. Arrival – Mercy, 2. Stay – The Sacrifice, 3. Departure – Reconciliation.[37] In the episodes we watch how Pfeijffer, a huge, theatrical figure with long hair and a deep voice, passes through the centre of Genoa following the Via di Pré, while meeting and interviewing several people. He talks to them in Italian, French and English and collects the life stories told by residents and new comers, while demonstrating how the Via di Pré has transformed in recent years. As we have already discussed, in the novel *La Superba* reality and fiction, life and writing are intertwined. Pfeijffer created the novel as an ingenious form of autobiography, for which literary historian Max Saunders (2010) coined the term 'autobiografiction'.[38] In *Letters from Genoa*, the author underscores this poetic position: 'I read myself back, I live like I write, I have a role in the romantic book that I wrote myself'.[39] In the television series, then, this mirroring of reality and fiction is worked out on yet another layer: the camera portrays the writer walking in Genoa, real shots are taken from written scenes, physical persons tell their stories echoing those of the characters from the novel. Migrants, Italian residents from Genoa, waiters and shopkeepers are interviewed and reiterate the stories of the novel in which memories, description, fantasies and confessions are assembled. We watch the author as persona moving in the city, while pictures and shots of Genoa connect to passages read by Pfeijffer's voice. The author's low tone is captivating, his huge body and his unhurried movements emphasize the intriguing divergence of this celebrated writer in the narrow streets full of poverty, consumerism symbols and sudden architectural elegance. This is a docu-drama or mockumentary in which documentary and fictional materials are intentionally combined, merged and synthesized.[40] The

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[36] 'Elke Marokkaan denkt dat je vanzelf rijk wordt in Europa (…) Maar ik heb de waarheid gezien, Ilja. Ik heb de waarheid gezien'. Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, p. 14.

[37] See: www.vpro.nl/programmas/via-genua.html?npo_cc=126& (accessed 15 October 2017).

[38] Autobiografiction connotes the literary relationship between fiction and a self's autobiography, rather than that between fiction and a self. Max Saunders, *Self-Impression, Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), p. 7.

[39] 'Zo wil ik liefhebben. Zoals nu. Dat ik mijzelf teruglees als personage in een romantisch boek, en dat ik, hoewel ik besef dat ik dat boek zelf heb verzonnen en dat ik dat boek leef zoals ik het schrijf, met verve invulling geef aan de romantische rol die ik mijzelf heb toebedacht'. Pfeijffer, *Brieven uit Genua*, p. 115.

[40] Steven N. Lipkin, Derek Paget and Jane Roscoe, 'Docudrama and Mock-documentary: Defining terms, Proposing Canons', Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer, *Docufictions, Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking,* (North Carolina & London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers), p. 1-11.

intermediary position of Pfeijffer as author, narrator, persona, character and real person involves recognition by the viewers and readers of the literary texts.

Pfeijffer interviews Patrick, a Moroccan man who lost an arm in a car accident and now works in a shop to be able to send money home to his family. Only people having a regular job can obtain a permit to stay in Italy. Pfeijffer encounters a group of young asylum seekers just arrived from Lampedusa which they reached by boat from Libya. They survived and consider each other 'family' now. The writer buys a smartphone for one of the guys, which is not accepted by the rest of the group. Pfeijffer meets the woman Nogaye from Senegal who has a young son and works as a housemaid for an old Italian woman, hoping that her husband will join her in Italy. He also talks—among others—to Matteo Salvini, representative of the Lega Nord, who despises the migrants coming in since they get three meals a day and a place to sleep, while Italian people suffer because of earthquakes and poverty.

All the different voices are social *and* individual, local and global, personal and public, and contribute to the complexity of the urban space as convivial space. This is superdiversity in the city: multiplicities mesh with each other in an intersection of simultaneities, gatherings, and encounters.[41] Pfeijffer's own voice heard as voice-over, quoting passages from his novel, orchestrates the Bakhtinian heteroglossia. Many voices and social discourses converge, and the one particular story is taken up by someone else. Pfeijffer concedes that all migrants, himself included, began their journey because of a dream of a better life elsewhere. Italy was better than the provincial town of Leiden, where he worked at the university. Italy is better than the poverty and unsafety of Senegal. Many people are portrayed, and several local scenes are conveyed: of the street, the churches, the harbour with huge cruise ships, the sea and the mountains surrounding the city. We hear voices, noises, traffic: all local sounds of a Mediterranean city. The television series is an evocation of the harsh life of migrants and the transformation of an urban medieval space, but it also is a romantic perspective on the hospitality of *La dolce Italia*.

The television series not only functions in the context of a literary oeuvre. The fact that the series was broadcast in January and February 2017, while pointing at migrant issues in a European city, was a meaningful public intervention, certainly with an eye on the parliamentary elections that would take place in the Netherlands on 15 March. In the context of these elections, more and more attention was paid to a nationalist, anti-migration and anti-European Union agenda, as propagandized by populist Geert Wilders, but taken over by many other politicians as well. Claiming that Genoa is 'an African city' was not without courage, even if it could be considered literary hyperbole. Pfeijffer was very serious in this claim and underlined his sympathy for the Italian way of receiving migrants. In a scene at the end of episode one, taken in a church with women sitting on the pews, Pfeijffer declares that the practice of welcoming refugees in Italy is more merciful than in Holland: first people get food and a place to sleep, and only then does the regular asylum procedure begin. Mercy is a Catholic term implying compassion, and the Dutch author feels a deep sympathy to this custom.

Soja combined three dimensions of human existence. Drawing on his theory we can further analyse how the television series and the novels represent urban space. Historically Genoa is complex and intersectional: situated by the sea, the harbour gave way to crusaders and traders so that the city has always seen people leaving and arriving. The difference today, however, as an Italian marquise explains to Pfeijffer, is that there are no longer restaurants in the harbour—the

[41] Arnaut et al., *Engaging Superdiversity*, p. 9.

arrivals do not have money and cannot afford meals. There is similarity and difference, multiple trajectories are brought together, carving out an African space in the Italian city. The spatiality of the city is remarkable, including the labyrinthine centre, the intimacy of the narrow medieval streets as public and private space, the mixing of languages (Italian, Arabic, Swahili), traditions and trash, of migrants and tourists. In this spatial conjuncture social relations are both easy and difficult because nothing is evident and everything has to be fought for.

In summary, Pfeijffer's oeuvre illustrates superdiversity and thirdspace. Various intermingled social discourses and voices can be noticed in his oeuvre: the discourses of the migrants from West-Africa, of the nationalists from the north of Italy, of the Arabic-speaking imam, the Genovese commons and shopkeepers, the aristocratic marquise, the Dutch writer, all moving in and around the Via di Pré. People speak but do not always communicate, they navigate the same street, but do not always meet. The street is real and imagined, a concrete as well as a mental image, an assemblage of ordinary and singular lives. The street brings together newcomers and people who have lived there for a long time, migrants and transgender prostitutes, the celebrated poet who does not want to be recognised by his Dutch readers who are there as tourists. The Via di Pré is an in-between-space beyond ordinary life, a place to hide and to transform in.

Concluding Comments on Urban Space in Literature

The questions asked at the beginning of this chapter can now be answered. Pfeijffer's writings and the television series demonstrate how the singular literary style of a specific author evokes a general urban recognition. We could argue that what Pfeijffer registers in the Via di Pré in Genoa can also be observed in other European cities. The Italian street is representative of the multicultural transformation of Europe. We can find similar streets in Rotterdam (de Kruiskade), Antwerp (the Berghem region) or Paris (the quartier next to Gare du Nord). From a positive perspective, we could characterise this street as a 'porous' location in the city, as described by Richard Sennett: 'people of all castes, classes, races and religions coming and going, doing deals or gossiping'.[42] From a negative perspective, we could say, as Pfeijffer does at the beginning of the television series, that streets like these are disturbing and uncomfortable, since 'many black people are strolling there and absorbing the space'.[43] The message that Pfeijffer brings forward is that we have to start meeting these people, we have to start listening to their stories in order to understand their lives and experiences.

Connected to this observation, it becomes clear that the *micro storia* of characters in the novels stand for a macro narrative on new cultural convivial spaces. Rashid, the seller of roses, is an ordinary character, but his story is representative of the stories of others. Meaningfulness is created on the spot, through the assumption of similarity. In this line of thought, the second 'intermezzo' *in La Superba* is significant, as it provides the story of Djiby, a migrant from Senegal,

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[42] Richard Sennett, 'The World Wants More "Porous" Cities – So Why Don't We Build Them?', *The Guardian* (27 November 2015), see: www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/27/delhi-electronic-market-urbanist-dream (accessed 15 October 2019).

[43] These words were spoken by Pfeijffer in the VPRO television series, episode 1: 'Ik heb altijd gehouden van deze straat, maar ik heb altijd doorgelopen', see: www.npo.nl/via-genua/22-01-2017/VPWON_1262486, at 7.59 min (accessed 15 October 2017).

who tells of his experiences *en route* to Italy. 'I have always wanted to become a character in a novel',[44] Djiby explains, but immediately it becomes clear that his story represents reports on human trafficking that we know from newspapers and the internet. Fiction brings us close to reality. This illustrates how the story of one person is representative of that of others, and that a local, historically loaded context could be re-entextualized in the broader global context. What is happening in Italy, happens in Spain or Greece as well. What occurs in Africa has consequences for Europe, as is underlined by Pfeijffer, when he repeats that the Via di Pré is Africa.

The power of literary imagination is needed in a European context in which more and more politicians lose contact with people's everyday realities. What we need is knowledge of the individual perspective on global issues, we need the general view beyond singular stories and vice versa. Literature, as Pfeijffer's work illustrates, is not just a social mirror, literature transforms, manipulates and critiques what takes place. The literary author reveals a thirdspace in his writing, in the ideas, invented scenes and words intersecting with what the filmmaker registers, the camera shoots and the public watches. The writer's perspective on the city is moulded by his prose, reality becomes literature and the literary characters can be recognised on television as real people. Pfeijffer guides us through Genoa showing a new idea of contemporary space: this Africa is the new Europe.

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[44] 'Ik heb altijd al graag een romanpersonage willen worden'. Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, 241.

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