



MEMORIES OF A MODERNITY-TO-BE

On truth and reconciliation in transitional South Africa

Oscar Hemer



According to Jan Nederveen Pieterse, the definition of globalization as a form of hyper-modernity is purely Eurocentric. Globalization goes much further back than the 16th century's Discovery of the New World or the 18th century's Enlightenment. Whichever symbolic beginning you choose, Modernity, as an historic era, happens to coincide with that of Western expansion and world domination.

It's obvious that the declaration of the very notion of Modernity's death in the 1980s was not only premature but also a particular phenomenon of the so called west. Modernity is very much alive in the world today, with China and India as the two giant challengers of Western economic and political supremacy. The ferocious modernization process in China resembles in many ways the modern projects of post World War II Europe (on both sides of the Iron Curtain) – yet in a much larger scale and at a much faster pace.

'Modernization' and 'globalization' tend to be seen as equivalent to a lesser or greater degree, and globalization is even sometimes regarded as the global fulfillment of 'the modern project'. The liberal interpretation of 'the end of History' has, for sure, been overshadowed by the backlash of (alleged and real) fundamentalist reactions and the ongoing global 'war on terrorism'. However, the dominant globalization discourse – the idea of a 'digital revolution' of 'informatization' as equivalent to the previous industrial revolution – remains a rerun of the modernization rhetoric: a reconstructed grand narrative of progress, not necessarily more sophisticated than its predecessors were.

According to Dutch sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2004), the definition of globalization as a form of hyper-modernity is purely Eurocentric. Globalization goes much further back than the 18th century (Enlightenment) or even the 16th century (Discovery of the New World). Whichever symbolic beginning you choose, Modernity, as an historic era, happens to coincide with that of Western expansion and world domination. In Nederveen Pieterse's view, the fundamental feature of globalization is *hybridization* – a process of cultural mélange that to some

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extent is interrupted by -and even radically opposed to- the modern experience.

Globalization is the term used to describe the current global transformational processes. But in order to fully understand these processes, we must realize that there is more to globalization than immediately meets the eye. This brings the post-modernity debate of the '80s to mind. The fundamental meaning of 'the post-modern condition' was not the end of the modern, but Modernity coming of age and becoming aware of its own historicity. Maybe it is only now that we are beginning to realize the full implications of that major shift – the modern becoming aware of its historicity, and also, and probably more important, the West becoming aware of its particularity. Simultaneously with the revival of a naive and unreflected upon modernization paradigm, we are now clearly experiencing what could be described as the *pluralization* and *de-westernization* of modernity.

What does this imply for the particular South African experience? I think that South Africa is actually an exemplary illustration, not only of the duality of globalization, but also of the fundamental ambivalence of modernity. South African literature and other creative production from the transition period bear evidence to that assumption.

Apartheid was one of the most elaborate projects of social engineering – comparable only to the grand modern disasters of fascism and communism in its repressive brutality, yet related to other more modest modernization projects, such as Sweden's social democracy. The apartheid state was a welfare state, albeit for whites only and boers/afrikaners in particular. 'Afrikaner advancement' was the core motivation. Yet, at the same time, apartheid was explicitly a reaction against modernity. In rhetoric, if not in practice, it aimed at preserving cultural diversity from the devastating influences of modern civilization.

This duality has led to several paradoxes. After the release of Mandela and the transition to democracy, the former pariah of the world community suddenly was turned into the great example – a sort of role model and pilot project for "diversity management", for the challenges facing the world as a whole. However, in South Africa the very notion of cultural difference has been compromised through its intrinsic associations with apartheid. In his introduction to the anthology *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* (2004), Leon de Kock makes the observation that "cultural heterogeneity is nothing new or surprising in a context of globalization, but the South African case is peculiar because it remains to this day a scene of largely *unresolved* difference".

South Africa as an entity, he explains, has come into being "by virtue of tumultuously clashing modalities, the modernity of a globally expanding Western culture intermeshing with an irreconcilable heterogeneity of cultures and epistemologies". Thus, in South Africa *memories of modernity* connote two parallel tendencies in literature and other forms of mediated fiction – probably in the arts in general. Firstly, an attempt to link back to an idealized pre-apartheid past – often depicted and interpreted as an embryonic modernity which is brutally interrupted. Let us call it 'the myth of Sophiatown' – Sophiatown being the famous black inner suburb of Johannesburg that all through the 1950s defied the Group Areas Act and other apartheid legislation, until it was finally evacuated and leveled to the ground in 1963. There are equivalents in almost all major South African cities – District Six in Cape Town, Cato Manor in Durban – but Sophiatown has the strongest presence in the public imaginary, not least internationally.

Zola Maseko's film *Drum* (2005) tells the story of Henry Nxumalo and the other legendary writers of *Drum* magazine in Sophiatown and reinforces the romantic vision of the swinging multicultural enclave of jazz, gangsters and political radicalism where the ruling motto, according to legend, was "Live fast, die young and get a good-looking corpse".

One of my strongest memories from my first journey to South Africa in '91 is my visit with writer and former gangster Don Mattera to Triomf, the white working-class suburb literally built on the ruins of Sophiatown. To me, that constitutes the most brutal and obscene memorial of racist South Africa. At the time, you could still see the crushed swimming pool next to the former Anglican Church, which was desecrated by the white mob and turned into a boxing hall before it was reinstated as Pinkster Protestante Kerk. There is brutal irony in the very name Triomf, the ruling National Party's pyrrhic victory over urban modernity. (*Triomf* is also the title of Marlene van Niekerke's novel from 1994, one of the most acclaimed literary works from the transition period.)

The myth of Sophiatown imagines a South Africa that never was. It is a projected dream of what South Africa could have been, hadn't it been for apartheid, and thereby also a kind of nostalgic utopian vision of what it may one day become.

The second tendency, closely connected to the first, is the attempt to come to grips with this alleged parenthesis: the investigation of the recent past with its first momentum coinciding with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission –TCR – 1996-97.

The most well known example, and one that certainly has inspired others,

is journalist/poet Antjie Krog's personal account of the TRC in *Country of My Skull* (1999), which I have discussed at some length before (Hemer 2005). Krog, herself an Afrikaner, had covered the Commission's hearings for the South African radio. But when she regarded her reporting in retrospect she realized that there was something missing, something which journalism (alone) could not disclose, and went back to the records to tell the story all over again, this time in a semi-fictitious way, which could also be described as a form of meta-journalism.

In re-examining the records and focusing on the different layers of the narratives, the key question for Krog was whether truth can be pursued at all, at any level beyond indisputable facts. Even though we may always be stuck with a patchwork of diverging stories, having to make more or less random selections and interpretations, she seemed inclined to say yes, and suggested fiction as a means to 'distill' truth from reality.

"Distilling" reality is more than just adding creative language or subjective interpretation, as in 'new journalism'; it may even include the bringing-in of fictitious characters, in order for example to "express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission" (Krog 1999, p. 256). This is where she crosses the line from a journalist perspective. Krog was heavily criticized by some of her journalist colleagues for allegedly confusing journalism and fiction. However, she is *deliberately* crossing the genre-lines, not to confuse them but to let the different perspectives and norms illuminate one another. This personal explorative method is pursued in her sequel hybrid prose book *A Change of Tongue* (2003), in which she investigates the notions of identity and belonging in times of rapid and radical transformation through the personal narratives of an array of South Africans from different backgrounds.

The abundance of inventive genre-crossing in recent South African literature is noteworthy¹, and it seems very likely that *Country of My Skull* somehow served as a catalyst or spark for this generic hybridization, which to some extent also had a predecessor in the creative journalism of *Drum* magazine (Chapman 2006).

Among black writers, playwright and novelist Zakes Mda is the one who has most explicitly addressed the recent past and the issues of the post-apartheid reality. His first novel, *Ways of Dying* (1995), is set in the wasteland of city and township in an unspecified South Africa during the interregnum years of the early '90s, between the unbanning of the liberation movements and the first democratic elections, when clashes between ANC and Inkatha, "third force" killings engineered by security agents, "necklacing" of alleged collaborators and other everyday atrocities, made death a way of life. His second and to date most ambitious novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), is going further back in history, to a crucial

and symbolically loaded event in Xhosa history; the disastrous millenarian Cattle-Killing Movement in the mid 1800s, when the prophecy of a young woman makes the people kill their cattle in the firm belief that their ancestors will return and drive the white intruders into the sea. This event is in the novel juxtaposed to the historical moment of the present, 1994.

The Heart of Redness is interesting not least from a 'memories of modernity' perspective. According to literary critic David Attwell, Mda is here reversing the trope of the modernization theme found in earlier generations of black South African writers: "[I]nstead of narrating the emergence of the African as modern subject – the end of innocence – the novel attempts a reintegration of the already-modern subject into the dilemmas of southern Africa's post-coloniality" (Attwell 2005, p. 198).

Mda's following novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), is an interesting example of the journalistic-literary genre-crossing mentioned earlier. It is based on a 'true story' – a nationally famous trial in 1971, when prominent white citizens of the little town Excelsior in the Free State were accused of breaking the Immorality Act, which forbade sex across the race lines. The proof of the miscegenation was a remarkable number of light-skinned infants in the black servants' quarters.

Mda tells the story from the seventies all the way up to the present and turns Excelsior into a microcosm of South Africa, with focus on the transition. It is a good-humored story, yet with critical underpinnings, disclosing the hypocrisy of the old and the new regime but also exposing and somehow celebrating the strange affinity between Afrikaner and African. As opposed to Krog's documentary approach, Mda's account has a purely fictional character, although it contains news reports from the event of the trial. It is a novel, which could easily be translated to a film or a TV-series, even as educational entertainment. From a 'truth perspective', I find Mda's method more problematic: there is no explicit meta-narrative and therefore no way of knowing where factual reality ends and the author's imagination takes over. How do the characters in the novel relate to the real persons of Excelsior? One may of course question whether that distinction is at all important. Even if Mda had made up the whole story – shouldn't it be regarded as a work of fiction in its own right? But then again, why doesn't he make it a purely allegorical story, in a fictitious small-town universe resembling the real Excelsior? Or – why doesn't he make a documentary, interviewing the living witnesses and letting them tell the story? What are the specific gains achieved by this fusing of genres? In Krog's case, it's evident; in Mda's I'm not sure.

Although *The Madonna of Excelsior* does not explicitly mention the TRC, *truth* and *reconciliation* are crucial categories here, more explicitly than in his preceding novels. Both truth and reconciliation are fictional constructions themselves, as demonstrated by Daniel Herwitz (2003) in

his analysis of the Commission's procedures. "The very idea of reconciliation in South Africa, of reconciliation as process and as goal or ideal, is, strictly speaking, a fiction (...) Reconciliation implies that beings were once one, came apart, and are now back together again. This is hardly, from the historical point of view, the case".

Yet, the urge for reconciliation seems to overshadow the quest for truth – and that, which may constitute the major critique of the commission, could also apply to much of the (mainstream) cultural production. By way of explanation, Herwitz points to the TRC's strong Christian element and the personal impact of its chairman, Bishop Desmond Tutu. The religious redemption theme, combined with the fictional structure of the very proceedings, has served almost as a matrix for artistic and literary expression in the transitional period. The most obvious example is perhaps Ian Gabriel's feature film *Forgiveness* (2004), which in a kind of pastiche Western form tells the story of an Afrikaner ex-cop who goes to a godforsaken town in the Western Cape to seek absolution from the family of one of his victims. His quest for closure brings old conflicts back to the surface and confronts all who meet him with morally ambiguous choices.

The redemption element is also very strong in 2006 Academy Award winning film *Tsotsi*, directed by Gavin Hood and based on playwright Athol Fugard's novel. The original story, published in 1980 but written in the early sixties, is actually set in Sophiatown, but the image it conveys is hardly the romanticized one. In the film, the story of the nameless gangster – *tsotsi* – who happens to kidnap a child is transposed to a nameless township in contemporary South Africa, but it retains its almost archetypal character. (The township, in contrast to the village or small town, is a representation of modernity.) There are no references to the TRC, or to apartheid. The only white character is an Afrikaner policeman. There are, however, allusions to the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the perpetrator seeking forgiveness is an orphan, himself a victim of abuse as a child.

In the key scene, *Tsotsi* is insulted by a crippled beggar in a wheelchair and then follows him, like a predator sneaking up behind its prey, to a vacant area below a freeway. It's a horrible scene, because you know that it is not the money he's after: he is going to take revenge on this angry but defenseless man. You can see the contempt in *Tsotsi*'s face – contempt for the weakness and the humiliation of his victim. But something in the defiance of this crippled man moves him – maybe simply the fact that he sees someone who is worse off than himself, someone seemingly living a miserable life, yet with the ability to appreciate beauty. In the novel, the victim has a name and a history, as a former worker in the gold mines – another marker of modernity! – who was crippled by a falling balk. In the film, this history is told in one single sentence, when *Tsotsi* asks him what happened to his legs.

Why this recurrent theme of redemption? Why this almost obsessive focus on reconciliation? (It would be very difficult to imagine a correspondent call for forgiveness between perpetrators and victims in the 'dirty war' of the 1970s in Latin America.) Does it have to do with South Africa's frustrated modernity?

Without any exception that I can think of, modernization as a project has historically coincided with a process of nation-building. Literature played a key role in the construction of national identities, in Europe as well as in the newly independent former colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Many post-colonial writers actively participated in the nation-building process, providing epics for identification and more or less deliberately contributing to a national imaginary. Fiction has served a modernizing and nationally mobilizing function in Ireland, Norway and Iceland as well as in Indonesia, Senegal and Nigeria.

In most of Africa, the national projects have failed and given room for disillusion, which may also be artistically productive, but neither happened in South Africa. National modernization was frustrated in an embryonic stage by the imposition of the perverse and exclusive national project of *afrikanerdom*. On the other hand, there was of course the anti-apartheid struggle, which served to forge a common culture of resistance. In the 1980s, literature played an important role in creating and proposing subject-positions that exceeded the racialized determinations of the apartheid system and the colonial legacy (Helgesson 1999). However, from an artistic point of view, the struggle was also a limiting and constraining denominator. All the focus was on the present and on politics, imposing a norm of documentary realism. In the heated literary debate of the '80s, between allegedly "aesthetic" and "activist" positions, the two white Nobel laureates-to-be, Nadine Gordimer and J M Coetzee, took antagonistic stands. In a review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Gordimer accused Coetzee of his "refusal to engage with the historical thrust of the time". Coetzee's heroes are, according to her, "those who ignore history, not make it". Coetzee on the other hand strongly opposed Gordimer's view of literature as a supplement to history, as he polemically put it. In the essay *The Novel Today*, published in 1988, he eloquently proposed the novel to be 'a rival to history': "I mean – to put it in its strongest form – a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process [...] perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words demythologizing history" (Coetzee, quoted in Helgesson 1999).

And it may well be that J M Coetzee's allegorical way of addressing the brutal absurdity of the apartheid state in for example *Life & Times of Michael K* had more lasting impact than the contemporary realistic novels with clear affiliations with the on-going political struggle. I would also claim that Coetzee's late novel *Disgrace* (1999) is one of the most disturbing, if not accurate, depictions of the South Africa of the early transition period, post apartheid and post TRC.

Yet, the minute I state that, the question immediately comes back. Impact on what? On whom? The title of the previously mentioned anthology is very evocative: South Africa in the *global* imaginary. But what about the *South African* imaginary? The English-language South African literature has largely been directed to an overseas audience – trying to explain South Africa to the world. The same goes for the many internationally acclaimed and awarded films of recent years – *Forgiveness*, *Yesterday* (2004), *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), *Tsotsi*, *Drum...* They have hardly been screened at all in South Africa, and if so, to a very limited audience. The South African public sphere remains very fragmented and incomplete. Moreover, one can really question whether it is even meaningful to talk about a common, collective imaginary – which has hitherto been a prerequisite for the formation of any imagined community that stretches beyond the limits of the local neighborhood or township.

If there isn't a common imaginary it is difficult to assume that literature – or art in general – would have any social impact at all. And if it has, it's still impossible to measure. Calling for evidence is like asking for a quantification of literary *quality*. Although we know that it is not possible, hardly anyone would deny that quality can be assessed, and most of us would agree that it is not merely a matter of subjective taste. There are standards for critical judgment that cannot be defined, and I would suggest, as a hypothesis for scrutiny, that *truth in the sense that I am hinting at here is the main criterion for literary quality*.

Truth may not always be compatible with reconciliation, and Coetzee's *Disgrace* is certainly a prime example. As Krog would put it, it is "busy with the truth" but not with reconciliation. The novel's main character, David Lurie, with certain easily recognizable traits in common with the author himself – so that many readers tend to identify both – is expelled from his position as a university teacher in Cape Town, after sexually abusing one of his students. He is tried by a committee that obviously resembles the TRC, but refuses to confess and be forgiven. He does repent in the end, in his solitary way, but without bowing to the illusionary official myth of the reconciled Rainbow Nation. What the novel proposes, according to Elleke Boehmer (2006), is "secular atonement" as an alternative to "the public and Christianized ritual of redemption through confession" offered by the TRC.

Disgrace was however accused of exploiting racial stereotypes by the ANC, and the submission to the Human Rights Commission's investigation into racism in the media may have been decisive for Coetzee's present voluntary exile in Adelaide, Australia, where his latest novel, *Slow Man* (2005), is written and set.

Arjun Appadurai (1996) refers to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as an example of fiction that can move the readers into intense action. I don't think it is a very good example. One can question whether the impact of *The Satanic Verses* really had to do with the expressive power of Rushdie's fiction. Most of the people instigating riots, in India and Great Britain, had surely not read the book. (Neither had ayatollah Khomeini.) They were driven by sheer rumors of the contained blasphemy, just like the more recent crowds burning Danish flags in protest against the Muhammad caricatures in *Jyllands-Posten*. But Appadurai is certainly right in claiming that fiction is part of the conceptual repertoire of contemporary societies and that fiction writers often contribute to the construction of social and moral maps for their readers.

Social impact does not necessarily imply that readers/listeners/viewers are moved into intense action. Works of art and fiction may just as well play a testimonial role and/or provide a deeper analysis, directly or indirectly informing debate among the so-called public opinion.

The role of fiction – and art in general – in a social context is, in my view, primarily as a transgressive means of investigation and innovation, and secondly as a vehicle for identification and empowerment. There isn't necessarily a conflict between these two objectives – fiction as investigation and social analysis on the one hand and as strategic communication on the other – but I strongly believe that the second must always be subordinated to the first. Just as truth, if not justice, comes before reconciliation – not the other way around.

Present-day cultural production in South Africa is very much testimony to this dialectic, which also reflects the dynamics of the young democracy with all its problems and huge potential. Nowadays, references to apartheid and the TRC evoke a certain fatigue among writers and artists, as the transition has gradually become a state of normality. But the lack of closure – the unresolved difference – is an artistically and intellectually productive condition, and South Africa may be the most interesting exponent of emerging global modernity. A modernity which – if I may propose a provisional definition – is freed of the constraints of a national imaginary, yet firmly grounded in a local transcultural context.

Oscar Hemer is a writer of fiction and non-fiction, and senior lecturer at Malmö University's School of Arts and Communication. He initiated the Master course in Communication for Development in 2000. He has worked extensively as a cultural journalist. His fifth novel will be published in September 2007. He is currently researching the theme of Fiction as Truth.

oscar.hemer@k3.mah.se

1 The blurring of borders between fact and fiction may be a universal phenomenon, but until recently confined to the experimental margins of literary creation. In South Africa it almost appears to be a dominant tendency: J M Coetzee's innovation of the academic novel in *Lives of the Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003); Njabulo Ndebele's philosophical biography-novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2004); Ivan Vladislavic's essayistic memoir of Johannesburg, *Portrait with Keys* (2006); Denis Hirson's *White Scars* (2006), a personal reading of four books that deeply influenced his life, etc. The publishers have often been hesitant as to whether they should label the books as fiction or non-fiction. Krog's *A Change of Tongue* was marketed in Holland as "creative non-fiction".

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