

Memories of a Modernity-to-be. Some Reflections on South Africa's Unresolved Dilemma

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Introduction

First, a few words on the very notion of Modernity. It is obvious that the declaration of its 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-WWII Europe (on both sides of the Iron Curtain) – yet on a much larger scale and at a much faster pace.

Usually ‘modernization’ and ‘globalization’ are seen as equivalent to a lesser or greater degree and globalization is even sometimes regarded as the global fulfilment of ‘the modern project’. The liberal interpretation of ‘the end of History’ has indeed 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 earlier industrial revolution – remains a rerun of the modernization rhetoric: a reconstructed grand narrative of progress, not necessarily more sophisticated than its predecessors.

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 historical era, happens to coincide with 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 extent is interrupted by and even radically opposed to the modern experience.

Globalization is the term used to describe the new 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 postmodernity debate of the 1980s to mind. The fundamental meaning of ‘the postmodern 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.

The South African scene

What does this imply for the particular South African experience? I would claim that South Africa is an excellent example, 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 provide evidence to support such an assumption.

David Attwell (2005, 1) defines two general historical conditions that mark the country's postcolonial history: 'The first is its textured postcoloniality, by which I mean that it combines the history of settler-colonial and migrant communities with that of indigenous societies. In a sense it combines in one country the histories of Australia and Nigeria'. The second general historical condition, according to Attwell, is the experience of an aggressive modernization that began with the industrialization of the mining industry in the 1880s. Industrialization 'created the conditions for the emergence of a pan-ethnic, non-racial movement for decolonialization in predominantly urban and polylingual environments'. (Attwell 2005, 3)

What Attwell describes could also be defined as an emerging culture of modernity – which in South Africa as in South America (and the rest of the world) is synonymous with the culture of the metropolis. But while South America's big cities fomented cultural and political modernism,¹ the potentially equally fertile South African urban modernity was to be doubly suppressed, by British imperial interests and rising Boer nationalism.² Johannesburg, the industrial metropolis supported by gold mining, 'grew as a frontier city closely tied to the global market economy and the world of consumption while at the same time mired in bigotry and prejudice, constantly caught between what it could be and what it ended up being'. (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004, 362).

Modernization was thus imposed and inhibited with equal force, and Johannesburg, where metropolitan consciousness went hand in hand with the most pervasive forms of white supremacy (*wit baasskap*) and the most brutalizing forms of economic violence, became living proof of the fact that a commercial society – just as a cosmopolitan one – could be founded on settler racism and oppression (Mbembe & Nuttall 2004, 363).

1 The twin cities of Rio de la Plata, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, are even arguably the cradle of literary modernism.

2 The defeated rural Boers (Afrikaners) who migrated in order to find work in the mining metropolis rightly regarded black African workers as superior competitors on the capitalist labour market.

The fundamental ambivalence of modernity becomes even more evident under apartheid.³ The apartheid system 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.⁴ 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. As a consequence, the very notion of cultural difference has been compromised in South Africa, through its intrinsic associations with apartheid.⁵

Leon de Kock (2004, 17) describes ‘South Africa’ as an entity which has come into being ‘only by virtue of tumultuously clashing modalities, the modernity of a globally expanding Western culture intermeshing with an irreconcilable heterogeneity of cultures and epistemologies’. Cultural heterogeneity is neither new nor surprising in a context of globalization, but the South African case is special since it ‘remains to this day a scene of largely *unresolved* difference’. De Kock proposes the *seam*, as opposed to the frontier, as an illuminating metaphor for this peculiar predicament. The seam is not only the site of difference, as the frontier might be defined, but ‘the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture’. It is an evocative metaphor; the stitching together of otherness and sameness, the place of both convergence and difference where the impossibility of origin and unity is staged repeatedly, where the divided culture compulsively returns time and time again. And the key element in this process is desire: ‘It is an incessant mark of desire that cultural inscription in the divided country seeks the site of lost origins, a lost or never-realized wholeness’ (De Kock 2004, 12).

Hence, fierce and frustrated modernization and unresolved difference are constitutive elements of the ‘textured postcoloniality’. Thus, memories of modernity in the cultural production of contemporary South Africa connote nostalgia for an idealized pre-apartheid past – often depicted and interpreted as an embryonic (cultural) modernity which is brutally interrupted.

3 The term apartheid is associated with the National Party, which came to power in 1948 on a ticket of full-scale racial segregation. Racial laws were, however, implemented and practised long before that. The Act of Union, 1909, which served as the constitutional base for the South African state after the Anglo-Boer war, explicitly excluded blacks. Segregation was already at hand, but apartheid implemented it systematically and more efficiently.

4 The latter comparison was an implicit motivation for the ‘Memories of Modernity’ project, involving four Swedish and four South African artists whose artworks were exhibited in Durban, April 2007, and Malmö, November 2007 – May 2008.

5 The apartheid state officially *reinvented* difference in the name of equality and applied, in theory, what would today be called a multicultural policy, aiming at restoring South Africa to its pre-colonial geography, by creating ‘homeland’ states that supposedly would eventually become ‘independent’, sovereign political and social entities (De Kock 2004, 16).

The Myth of Sophiatown

Although the black poor constituted what Mbembe and Nuttall call the underside of the mining city's modernity, the Johannesburg of the 1950s gave rise to a vibrant and racially diverse culture, with its epicentre in the inner suburb of Sophiatown, which 'offered unprecedented possibilities for blacks to choose and invent their society from the novel distractions of urban life' (Gready 2002, quoted in Mbembe & Nuttall 2004, 364). The mixed and defiant Sophiatown attained mythical status even before it was finally evacuated and levelled 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 holds the strongest presence in the public imaginary, not least internationally. Zola Maseko's feature film *Drum* (2004) tells the story of Henry Nxumalo and the other legendary writers of *Drum* magazine and reinforces the romanticized notion of a 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!'⁶

On my first journey to South Africa in 1991 I was guided by writer and former gangster Don Mattera.⁷ He took me on a tour through the endless dismal townships south and west of the formerly ethnically cleansed white city; Lenasia, Eldorado Park and Soweto (abbreviation of Southern Western Townships), to which Asians, 'coloureds' and blacks were deported and 'resettled' in accordance with the Group Areas Act.⁸ It was Sunday before a two-day strike and the atmosphere in Soweto was tense with protest and readiness for violent action. I was scared, and I could sense that even my scarred Virgil was nervous. But the strongest lasting memory of that city tour is my earlier visit to Triomf, the white working-class suburb that was literally built on the ruins of Sophiatown. At the time, one could still see the remnants of the demolished swimming pool nextdoor to the former Anglican Church, where legendary Father Trevor Huddleston denounced apartheid in his Sunday sermons. The church was desecrated by the white mob and turned into a boxing hall before being reconsecrated as Pinkster Protestante Kerk.

To me, this constitutes the most obscene memorial of racist South Africa. There is brutal irony in the very name Triomf, in the ruling National Party's pyrrhic victory over urban modernity. *Triomf* is also the title of Marlene van Niekerk's novel from

6 *A good-looking corpse* (1991) is the title of white writer Mike Nicol's documentary story of 'a decade when hope turned to bitter disillusionment'.

7 As Zinga Special, he was the feared leader of The Vultures, in constant gang war with The Russians. Mattera has depicted his childhood and violent youth in the autobiographical novel *Gone with the Twilight – a Story of Sophiatown*, 1987.

8 Asians, 'coloureds' and blacks were the three main categories of non-whites in the hierarchical Apartheid classification system. Asians (mostly Indian) and coloureds (mixed black and white) were middle categories with a higher status than blacks. Light-skin coloureds could even 'pass for whites', in which case the doors to upward social mobility suddenly opened. Skin colour was the decisive factor, and the arbitrary racial division could cut through a family.

1994, one of the most acclaimed literary works of the transition period.⁹ It is the story of a dysfunctional family of poor Afrikaners and their daily struggle in the suburb, showing how apartheid failed even those it was designed to benefit.

Hence even in literature Triomf becomes the inverted myth of Sophiatown, which is really the myth of a lost or never realized wholeness. It imagines a South Africa that never was. It is a projected illusion of what South Africa could have ended up being without apartheid, and thereby also a kind of nostalgic utopian vision of what it may one day become.

Hybrid genres

Another tendency in contemporary literature and art, closely connected to the first, is the attempt to come to grips with the alleged parenthesis of apartheid: the investigation of the recent past with its first momentum coinciding with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission TRC – 1996–98.

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 elsewhere (Hemer 2005). Krog, herself an Afrikaner, had covered the Commission's hearings for the South African radio. But when she reviewed 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-fictional 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 of 'distilling' 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 fictional characters, in order for example to 'express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission' (Krog 1999, 256). This is where she crosses the line from a journalistic perspective. Krog was heavily criticized by some of her journalist colleagues for allegedly blurring journalism and fiction. However, she is *deliberately* crossing the genre-lines, not to blur them but to let the different perspectives and norms illuminate one another. This personal explorative method is pursued in her sequel hybrid prose work *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.

9 English translation 1999 by Leon de Kock.

The blurring of borders between fact and fiction may be a universal phenomenon, but until recently it was confined to the experimental margins of literary creation. In South Africa it appears to be almost the dominant tendency: J. M. Coetzee's innovative use 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* (2003); 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. Publishers have often been hesitant as to whether they should label the books fiction or non-fiction. Krog's *A Change of Tongue* was marketed in Holland as 'creative non-fiction'. It seems very likely that *Country of My Skull* somehow served as a catalyst or spark for this generic hybridization, which also had its 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 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 1990s, 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, the 'necklacing' of alleged collaborators and other everyday atrocities, made death a way of life. His second and most ambitious novel to date, *The Heart of Redness* (2000) goes 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 made the people kill their cattle in the firm belief that their ancestors would return and drive the white intruders into the sea. This event is juxtaposed in the novel with the historical moment of the present, 1994. *The Heart of Redness* is interesting not least from a 'memories of modernity' perspective. According to David Attwell, Mda reverses here 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, 198)

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

Mda tells the story from the seventies right up to the present and turns Excelsior into a microcosm of South Africa, with the focus on the transition period. It is a good-humoured story, yet with critical underpinnings, disclosing the hypocrisy of the old and the new regimes but also exposing and somehow celebrating the

strange affinity between Afrikaner and African.¹⁰ As opposed to Krog's documentary approach, Mda's account has a purely fictional character, although it contains news reports from the events of the trial. It is a novel, which could easily be translated into a film or 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 important at all. Even if Mda had made up the whole story – should it not be regarded as a work of fiction in its own right? But then again, why does he not make it a purely allegorical story, like *Ways of Dying*, in a fictional small-town universe resembling the real Excelsior? Or – why does he not 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 is quite clear; in Mda's I am not sure.

Truth and Reconciliation

Although *The Madonna of Excelsior* does not explicitly mention the TRC, *truth* and *reconciliation* are crucial categories in the novel, more explicitly than in his preceding works. Both truth and reconciliation are fictional constructions themselves, as demonstrated by Daniel Herwitz (2003, 41) 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. By way of explanation, Herwitz points to the TRC's strong Christian element and the personal impact of its chairman, Archbishop 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 following the TRC.¹¹ The most obvious example is perhaps Ian Gabriel's feature film *Forgiveness* (2004), which in a kind of pastiche of the Wild West form tells

10 Obviously the tabooed miscegenation has been much more common than Afrikaner nationalist ideology had us believe. In the 19th century the condescending English attitude towards the Boers resembled the racist contempt for the Portuguese; they were lumped together and both accused of mixing with the natives. See for example Nuttall 2004.

11 References to the transition often include the liberation struggle of the 1970s and 1980s, and the prolific literary and artistic expression of these crucial decades. But for my purpose here it makes sense to set 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the liberation movements unbanned, as the starting point for the process which acquired momentum with the 1994 elections and Mandela's installation as South Africa's first democratic president. In literary terms the transition period may be experiencing its momentum now towards the end of the first decade of the new century, but I choose to leave the end date open, since the transformation of South African society is an ongoing process with a multitude of possible outcomes.

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 the 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 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 on its prey, to a deserted area below a freeway. It is a terrible scene, because the viewer knows that it is not the money he is after: he is going to take revenge on this angry but defenceless man. We can see the contempt in *Tsotsi*'s face – contempt for the weakness and the humiliation of his victim. But something in the defiance of the crippled man moves him – maybe simply the fact that he sees someone 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 baulk. In the film, this history is told in one single sentence, when *Tsotsi* asks him what happened to his legs.

Frustrated nation-building

Why this recurrent theme of redemption? Why this almost obsessive focus on reconciliation? (It would be very difficult to imagine a correspondent calling 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 coincided historically with a process of nation building. Literature has 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 postcolonial writers actively participated in the nation-building process, providing epics for identification and contributing more or less deliberately 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 way to disillusion, which may also be artistically productive, but neither happened in South Africa. National modernization was frustrated in its 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 factor. In the heated literary debate of the 1980s, between allegedly 'aesthetic' and 'activist' positions, the two white Nobel laureates-to-be, Nadine Gordimer and J M Coetzee, took antagonistic stands. In her review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, Gordimer accused Coetzee of his 'refusal to engage with the historical thrust of the time'.¹² 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 his essay *The Novel Today*, published in 1988, he eloquently proposed the novel as '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, 11).

In retrospect it seems likely 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 a 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. Yet, the minute I state that, the question immediately arises. Impact on what? On whom? The title of the previously quoted anthology is very evocative: *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* (De Kock, 2004). But what about the *South African imaginary*? The English-language South African literature has largely been directed at an overseas audience – trying to explain South Africa to the world. The same goes for the many internationally acclaimed and award-winning films of recent years – *Forgiveness*, *Yesterday* (2004), *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), *Tsotsi*, *Drum* ... They have hardly been screened at all in South Africa, and when they have, to a very limited audience. The South African public sphere remains very fragmented and incomplete. Moreover, one might even question whether it is

¹² *The New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1984.

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 is no common imaginary, it is difficult to assume that literature – or art in general – can have any social impact at all. And if it has, it remains impossible to measure. Calling for evidence is like asking for a quantification of literary *quality*. Although we know that to be impossible, 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 of 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, who has certain easily recognizable traits in common with the author himself – so that many readers tend to identify one with the other – 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, 137), is 'secular atonement' as an alternative to 'the public and Christianized ritual of redemption through confession' offered by the TRC.

Disgrace was however accused by the ANC of exploiting racial stereotypes, and the submission made 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.

Fiction and social change

Arjun Appadurai (1996) refers to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as an example of fiction that can move its readers to intense action. I do not believe it is a very good example. One could 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 only by rumours of the contained blasphemy, just like the more recent crowds who burned Danish flags in protest against the caricatures of Muhammad in *Jyllands-Posten*. But Appadurai is certainly right in claiming that fiction is part of the conceptual repertoire of contemporary societies and that writers of fiction 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 to intense action. Works of art and fiction may simply play a testimonial role and/

or provide a deeper analysis which, directly or indirectly, informs debate among so-called public opinion.

The role of fiction – and art in general – in a social context is, in my view, primarily a transgressive means of investigation and innovation, and secondly a vehicle for identification and empowerment. There is no necessary 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 prove to be the most interesting exponent of emerging global modernity. A modernity which – if I may propose a provisional definition – is free of the constraints of a national imaginary, yet firmly grounded in a local transcultural context.

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