Fiction’s Truth and Social Change

Preliminary outlines for an investigation of fiction as a research method and a means of communication for social change

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Abstract

As indicated by Appadurai (1996) and Ashcroft (2001), fiction has a privileged position in relation to journalism and other writing practices when it comes to promoting social action and change. Dramatized fictions, not least, in the form of live theatre, film or broadcast soap operas, are potentially very powerful communication tools.

Literature played a key-role in building the imagined communities of both colonial empires and nation-states, in Europe as well as in the newly independent former colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Today, not only literature but also other forms of mediated fiction may serve as important means of deconstructing the same mythologies and, possibly, foster the building of new transnational communities.

My focus in this paper is on literary fiction as a transgressive means of investigation on the one hand and as a vehicle for cultural identification and social empowerment on the other. I will argue that these two aspects are intrinsically connected, and that the second aim should be subordinated to the first.

Keywords are Truth, Transgression and Interpolation.
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Introduction

The subject of my proposed investigation could be formulated more simply, as two questions: What can fiction tell us about the world, that journalism and science cannot? And to what purpose?

As a fiction writer myself I find those questions more and more compelling. Why do I write at all? Why do I prefer fiction to journalism? And why do I write novels, rather than educational soap operas? Whenever I attempt to articulate an answer I inevitably come across the notion of ‘truth’. Fiction’s truth may seem like a contradiction, since the very word ‘fiction’ usually is understood as opposed to ‘fact’. It is obvious that any definition of literary truth must be different from, yet of course overlapping with, the definitions of journalistic or academic truth.

My intention is precisely to discuss fiction and its claim on truth in relation to these other two practices – journalism and academic writing. I am particularly interested in literary and fictional strategies that consciously transgress the genre boundaries, in a deliberate attempt to achieve and communicate a deeper understanding of reality.
**Premises**

_The Writer’s Perspective_

I wish to do the investigation primarily from the perspective of the fiction writer. I am not a researcher in comparative literature, and I don’t consider myself to be a critic although I have written hundreds of literary reviews during more than twenty years profession as an arts journalist¹.

In the late ‘70s I worked as an assistant in the planning of a research organization at Stockholm’s then independent School of Journalism (now part of Stockholm University) and the prime goal of the rector Lars Furhoff was to encourage journalists and information officers to investigate their own profession. It may have had some limited success, but few journalists choose an academic career and self-reflective journalism remains a scarce resource. Self-reflective literature, on the other hand, is abundant. Meta-literary reflection has always been a constitutive part of modernism, and the post-modern debate of the 1980s has made it hard, not to say impossible, for any serious writer to ignore fundamental questions such as _who_ is narrating and from _where_. Writers reflecting on their own writing are also easily found; it is almost a genre on its own. But those reflections are mostly surprisingly shallow and often coquettish: The great writer (usually a man) reveals his eccentric routines to the humble reader (usually a woman) or gives paternalistic advice to presumptive young followers. There are of course important exceptions – and I intend to make a systematic inventory of them – but generally I dare state that the often unreflected romantic view on writing as an inspirational gift prevails among fiction writers in Western societies.
**Interpolation**

A second point of departure is the vast and complex area of post-colonial experience, which has found one of its most accurate expressions in literature. In fact, post-colonial theory is intimately connected to post-colonial literary practice. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), generally regarded as the foundation stone of post-colonial thought as a discipline, is basically a *post-colonial reading* of significant works in British and French literature from the colonial era, in order to reveal and demonstrate the contradictions of the colonialist ideologies. A similarly influential reading of contemporary literature from the British Commonwealth (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989) suggested that the current literary revival in the English language seemed to almost exclusively involve writers originating from either the former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Australia, or minority groups in the metropolitan centre (London)².

In the arts in general, and literature and music in particular, impulses have increasingly been going from ‘periphery’ to ‘centre’. The empire writes back, as Ashcroft et al wittingly put it, and this process implies a transformation of the self-understanding, not only of the former colonies but also of the former and new metropolis, including countries like Sweden that were not formally part of the colonial system. Ashcroft (2001) introduces the concept *interpolation* to describe the transformative energy of post-colonial discourse.

…[T]he most effective post-colonial resistance has always been the wrestling, from imperial hands, of some measure of political control over such things as language, writing and various kinds of cultural discourse, the entry into the ‘scene’ of colonization to reveal frictions of cultural difference, to actually make use of aspects of the colonizing culture so
as to generate transformative cultural production. In this way the colonized subject ‘interpolates’ the dominant discourse, and this word *interpolate* describes a wide range of resistant practices. (47)

Moreover, this interpolating resistance, as opposed to resistance as (violent) counterforce, “involves the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a wide range of counter-discursive tactics into the dominant discourse without asserting a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity”. And this very act of interpolation is, according to Ashcroft, “the initial (and essential) movement in the process of post-colonial transformation” (48).

Ashcroft’s distinction between the two forms of post-colonial resistance - as ‘counterforce’ and as ‘interpolation’ - resembles Manuel Castells’ definitions of identity policies with regard to globalization: the reactive ‘resistance identity’, which rejects the domination of the global networks by reconstructing meaning on the basis of an entirely distinct system of values and beliefs, versus the proactive ‘project identity’, sometimes emanating from the former but aiming at transforming the overall pattern of social relationships (Castells 1997). It could also be translated to the opposing attitudes towards ‘development’ – the rejection proposed by the so called post-development school versus the reconstruction of development suggested by Nederveen Pieterse (2001) – or the problematic relation to *modernity* in general within the field of communication for development and social change.

If we are to imagine global change, I would argue that post-colonial interpolation, as suggested by Ashcroft, is the most proactive strategy. Re-focusing on modernity – or rather *modernities* in the plural3 – does certainly not imply a return to the modernization
paradigm, which equated modernization and westernization. Interpolation of the
dominant globalization discourse could rather be defined as the de-westernization of
modernity, what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) means by *provincializing Europe* – that is,
the task of exploring how European thought, which is now everybody’s heritage and
affects the whole world, may be renewed from and for the margins (2000: 16).

As demonstrated by the evidence of post-colonial literature, it is perfectly possible to
use dominant literary forms to disseminate a different (non-Western) world view to a
wide audience. In fact, global modernity took on a plural form in art and literature before
being articulated in theory.

*Re-reading Freire*

Not only has there been surprisingly little contact between the discourses of post-
colonialism on the one hand and cultural globalization on the other – with Arjun
Appadurai as one of the few exceptional connectors: Post-colonial thought has hardly at
all influenced the theory and practice of communication for development. This is even
more surprising, because whereas globalization theories primarily analyze the
industrialized world and its alleged transition to an informational economy and network
society, post-colonialism and communication for development share a focus on the
developing countries of what is still commonly referred to as the third world.

Paolo Freire’s work on literacy and ‘the pedagogy of the oppressed’ dates primarily
from the late 1960s and early ‘70s. It is in other words contemporary with the emerging
post-colonial thinking and moreover has a common source of inspiration in Frantz Fanon,
whose widely influential *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) strongly emphasized the need
for simultaneously modern and anti-colonial education as a key to (post-colonial) liberation.

The lack of communication does in this case not have to do with the language barrier, since Freire was translated to English even before he was published in Portuguese. His theories have however had their largest impact in Latin America, while post-colonial thought is still primarily a concern of scholars from the former British and, to a much lesser extent, French empires. But even so, it is quite astonishing to read Appadurai’s extensive analysis of the relation between ‘word’ and ‘world’ (1996: 51-52) without one single reference to Freire’s discussion on reading and writing the world¹ (1987). Likewise, there are few references to any of the post-colonial theorists in the abundant Latin American literature on communication and pedagogy for social change.

However, Appadurai (who else?) makes an interesting connection in the introduction to his anthology *Globalization* (2001), where he makes a general appeal for ‘globalization from below’ and specifically calls for “new forms of pedagogy (in the sense of Freire) that could level the theoretical playing field for grassroots activists in international fora” (2001: 16).

Although Freire does not specifically speak about fiction, and Appadurai is primarily interested in “ethnographic writing”, I believe that a re-reading of Freire in the light of post-colonial perspectives, particularly Appadurai’s analysis of “the role of imagination in social life”, will provide a productive theoretical framework for a deeper study on the relation between fiction and social change.

**Examples**
I will gather my main material from Southern Africa and Latin America, since they are two literary worlds to which I have a long-time relationship, as a fiction writer and as a journalist. They are both extraordinarily rich in literary imagination and moreover share a common experience of dealing with a traumatic near past; in Southern Africa the brutal colonial wars and the violent last years of the apartheid system; in Latin America the military juntas’ ‘dirty war’ on the militant left.

*Truth and Reconciliation*

Truth and Reconciliation are crucial categories here, both themselves fictional constructions, as demonstrated by Daniel Herwitz (2003) in his analysis of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The way of truth is not the only fictional construction regulating the procedures of the TRC. The very idea of *reconciliation* in South Africa, of reconciliation as process and as goal or ideal, is, strictly speaking, a fiction as well. 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 (…) (41)

Regardless of the well-founded critique of its judicial insufficiency and impotence, the impact of the TRC on South African society and cultural production in the present transitional period cannot be over-estimated. By way of explanation, Herwitz points to its 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. The most
obvious case is perhaps Ian Gabriel’s award-winning film *Forgiveness* (2004), which in a kind of pastiche Western form tells the story of an Afrikaner ex-cop (Coetzee) who goes to a godforsaken town (Paternoster) in the Western Cape to seek absolution from the coloured 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 yet decisive choices.

A more clear-cut example for my purpose here, which I have discussed at some length before (Hemer 2005), is journalist/poet Antjie Krog’s personal account of the TRC in *Country of My Skull* (1999). Krog, herself an Afrikaner, had covered the Commission’s work 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 cover. So she went back to the records and told the story all over again, but in a semi-fictitious way, which could also be described as a kind of meta-journalism.

A key chapter, exemplary of her method and style, delves into the diverging versions of the killing of black police sergeant Richard Mothasi and his wife in November 1987. The three members of the death squad all testify to the TRC, but it is not clear from their stories whether the killing of the wife and sparing of the couple’s six-year-old son, sleeping in another room, were intended or not. It is not even clear who actually shot Irene Mothasi, since two of the murderers put the blame on each other.

Herwitz analyzes the same case at the several levels of truth set forth by the TRC. Although there is a general agreement that the killings actually took place, uncertainty enters already at the first level of ‘factual truth’, where individual responsibility of the perpetrators comes in, and at the second level, that of broader explanatory and causal frameworks,
Nietzsche’s dictum that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’ takes on special aptness, since the line between fact and interpretation is itself a matter of debate (interpretation) rather than of fact (Herwitz 2003: 36).

At the proceeding levels of what the Commission report defines as *social, dialogic* and, finally, *restorative* truth, the underlying religious imagination becomes evident. Herwitz mockingly compares the proposed progression to

“the four-fold way of Buddhism, or “the seven stages if enlightenment” that the young European hippie so admires when he reads his mystical literature on the airplane to an ashram in Poona (37).

To Krog, focusing on the different layers of the narratives, the key question is 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 seems inclined to say yes, and she suggests fiction as a means to ‘distill’ reality.

[My truth is] quilted together from hundreds of stories that we’ve experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective, shaped by my state of mind at the time and now also by the audience I’m telling the story to. In every story there is hearsay, there is a grouping together of things that didn’t necessarily happen together, there are assumptions, there are exaggerations to bring home the enormities of situations, there is downplaying to confirm innocence. And all of this together makes up the whole country’s truth. So also the lies. And the stories that date from earlier times (Krog 1999:256).
“Distilling” reality may even include the bringing-in of fictitious characters, in order for example to “express the psychological underpinnings of the Commission”. This is where she crosses the line from a journalistic perspective, and she was heavily criticized by some of her colleagues for supposedly confusing journalism and fiction. But she is deliberately crossing the genre-lines, not in order to confuse them but to let the different perspectives and norms illuminate one another. The question is of course whether she succeeds or not. I think she does.

The Will

The South African TRC has had successors in for example Guatemala and Chile, but none of the corresponding investigations in Latin America have been as influential as Tutu’s Commission. In Argentina, where the systematic persecution of leftist activists achieved the character and proportions of a holocaust, few had survived the “centres of detention” to testify.

Prominent writers like Rodolfo Walsh and Haroldo Conti were among the disappeared, and for almost two decades, the stories of the rebellion and the dirty war remained largely untold in literature and art. But in the last years new remarkable attempts have been made at reconstructing this disastrous period in modern Argentine history. One of them is the three-volume documentary La Voluntad (The Will, 1997, 1998) by Eduardo Anguita and Martin Caparrós, which tells “the history of the revolutionary militancy in Argentina 1966 – 1978” in meticulous detail, through testimonies, news articles and other contemporary documents of all kinds, from music hit
charts and fashion magazines to literary feuds and philosophical discussions. The resulting mosaic of true stories brings the tragic fate of a generation to astonishing life.

“La Voluntad” is more than mere documentation. The stories are structured by a narrative which sometimes fills in the gaps where facts or testimonies are scarce or absent. But is it fiction? What are the limits to interpretation? Would it be less true if (some of) the characters were invented by the authors? To me these are crucial and very intriguing questions, especially since I have used – or re-used – some of Anguita’s and Caparrós’s material for my own work, the forthcoming novel Santiago – Historien om Gerardo K (“Santiago – The History of Gerardo K”), in which I approach the experience of my own generation in South America by inventing a life story that could have been my own. The challenge is to make such story believable for someone who actually grew up in Argentina and experienced the world I am imagining.

Fiction can of course also be the only way to approach a contemporary or historical truth. Argentine-born Swedish resident Julio Millares's novel El Cielo No Puede Esperar (Heaven Can't Wait), chooses to represent the dirty war from the perspective of the perpetrators (who never testified to any Truth Commission). It tells the horrific story of “the school”, ESMA – the torture centre that is going to be preserved as a museum of the military junta's reign of terror – and it is not the generals but the junior officers who are at the centre of interest, the foot-soldiers, the executors of banal evil, those who obey orders, sometimes willingly but just as often in fear and confusion, and with gnawing pangs of conscience.

The fragmentary format creates confusion, an almost claustrophobic feeling of presence, and the style is characterized by restrained terseness. The characters are utterly
believable – whether they are modelled on real people or not seems completely irrelevant – because Millares speaks both with the moral authority of one who has survived, and through his supreme command of the literary means of expression. (In this case, in a context where memories of the still unreconciled past are being heavily disputed, it may even be crucial to make a very clear distinction between fiction and documentary and not fuse the genres. In any case it is a matter of very sensitive balancing.)

Investigation through performance

A third region of focus, likewise rich in cultural expression and with an even more recent history of traumatic experience, is the Balkans. Some of the methodologically most radical strategies are to be found there. I will not discuss them at length here. Let me just mention Serbian film-maker Zelimir Zilniks staging of “Marshall Tito’s return to the Serbs”, where he lets an actor dressed as the former Yugoslav leader Tito walk around the streets of Belgrade and talk with people about what has happened since he passed away. From the beginning it is clear that the by-passers are aware of and amused by the fiction; those who stop to talk are willingly playing the game. But after a while they seem to be so carried away by the act that they forget the fictitious frame; they actually confess their sorrow and anger and disillusion to the actor, as if they believed that he really is the resurrected Marshall. The Tito effigy thus serves as a catalyst for a ‘truth’ about the conditions in post-war Serbia that no reporter or academic researcher would probably ever be able to evoke.
Hypotheses

Fiction as Social Analysis

Appadurai refers to Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* as an example of fiction that can move the readers into intense action (1996: 58). It is not 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 crowds burning Danish flags in protest against the Muhammad caricatures in Jyllands-Posten. The massive emotional impact of Brazilian telenovelas with blurred borders between mediated fiction and real-life action, as analyzed by Thomas Tufte (2000), would have been a better example. 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.

Literature played a key-role in the formation of nation-states and the construction of national identity, in Europe as well as in the newly independent former colonies of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Many post-colonial writers actively contributed to the nation-building process, providing epics for identification. Fiction has served a similar (nationally) modernizing and vitalizing function in Ireland, Norway and Iceland as it has in India and Nigeria.6

If fiction – prose, poetry, drama, film – played a crucial role in building the imagined communities of both colonial empires and nation-states, I assume that literature and other
forms of mediated fiction may also serve as an important means of deconstructing the same mental figures and, possibly, foster the building of new transnational and glocal communities.

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. South Africa in the 1980s is an example of the important role of literary imagination in creating and proposing subject-positions that exceeded the racialized determinations of the apartheid system and the colonial legacy (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 The Life & Times of Michael K had more lasting impact on South African imaginary 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 accurate, yet of course subjective, descriptions of the South Africa of the early transition period, post apartheid and post TRC. But how can such impact, which does not translate into social action or individual behavior change, be measured? Calling for evidence is like asking for a quantification of literary quality. We know that it is impossible, yet 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 trying to encircle here is the main criterion for literary quality.
Truth may not always be compatible with reconciliation, and *Disgrace* is certainly a prime example. It is, as Krog would put it, “busy with the truth” but not with reconciliation, other than perhaps at an individual level. The novel’s main character David Lurie does repent in the end, in his solitary way, but without bowing to the illusionary myth of the reconciled New South Africa. Coetzee’s non-compromising stand remained as controversial after apartheid as it had been during the struggle and eventually led him to voluntary exile in Australia.

**Fiction as Strategic Communication**

The role of fiction that I have pictured above is primarily as a transgressive means of investigation and innovation, secondly as a vehicle for cultural identification and social empowerment. From the perspective of the communicator for social change the second may at a first glance seem most relevant, or immediately applicable. We have, in the last ten or fifteen years, seen an enormous rise in the use of soap operas and other forms of fictional popular culture as tools of strategic communication. The successful use of narrative and fiction is one of the most striking features when it comes to actually mediating social change. *Edutainment* (Education-Entertainment) has become the favored medium for HIV/AIDS communication, with success stories such as HIP Femina in Tanzania, Puntos de Encuentro in Nicaragua and the often evoked Soul City of South Africa (Hemer & Tufte 2005, chapters 9, 23, 24, 25).

There isn’t necessarily a conflict between the two objectives – fiction as investigation and social analysis on the one hand and as strategic communication on the other – but the hypothesis I intend to prove is that they are intrinsically connected and that the second
must always be subordinated to the first. The instrumental use of fiction in campaigns that merely aim at individual behavior change is, at best, a form of social marketing and may have limited effect as such – provided that it is repeated incessantly, like commercial advertisements.

Lasting social change requires a number of concurrent factors, many of which may be incidental and difficult to predict. But a prerequisite for any work of fiction with claims to really transform the world, in Freire’s sense, is that it is capable of saying something different, by consciously or subconsciously transcending the polarities and limitations of its time and place. Fiction’s truth is almost by definition unpredictable. It defies not only the market logic, but often also communication strategies. However, regardless of our purpose – whether we are writers of novels or communicators for social change – we should start by re-examining our own professional practices, whose conventions we too often take for granted, and reclaim the critical power of writing: overcoming the traditional separation between form and content, exploring the tension between what is documented and what is imagined.
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There is not necessarily an antagonism between the fiction writer and the critic; their positions are juxtaposed and the difference in perspective may be subtle, but it is crucial.

The post-colonial is mainly attributed to the two principal powers of the late colonial era, the British and French empires, but post-colonial literature found its ground-breaking predecessor in the Latin American literary ‘boom’ of the 1970s. The influence of ‘magical realism’ and especially Gabriel García Márquez’ masterpiece *Cien años de soledad* (A Hundred Years of Solitude) has, for good and for bad, been enormous among writers all over the world, not least in the former British colonies. Salman Rushdie, the iconic figure of the post-colonial literary boom, has often declared his debt to García Márquez for the conception of his twice Booker Prize-awarded first novel, *Midnight’s Children*. Latin American writers’ main contribution to world literature was not only their syncretistic fusion of myth and history but, more importantly, their *incorporation of the colonial other* into the scheme of the (European) modern novel – not only as an ornamental figure, as in the abundant existing colonial literature, but as a subject.

The solemn declaration of Modernity’s Death in the 1980s was obviously premature. Like the preceding alleged death of ideologies in the ‘50s and impending fall of capitalism in the ‘60s. Or the subsequent proclamation of ‘the end of History’, ‘The postmodern condition’ was coined by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who actually rejected the term *postmodernism*, and lucidly but somewhat obscurely talked about the postmodern as the modern at its beginning: as the deconstructive impulse of modernity itself. The prefix ‘post’, however, was confusing and misleading. Rather than in post-modernity, we are living in conditions of hyper-modernity or global modernity, the latter implying that we should start thinking of the modern condition in plural, as modernities.

Reading the word is dependent upon reading the world, according to Freire, and literacy is that which enables us to more fully read and transform the world - to *write the world*.

The first South African edition was published in 1998, but I refer to the British edition, with an added epilogue.

One crucial difference, though, is that the literature of the developing world is mainly written in the European colonial languages. This was a matter of heated discussion among some of the early post-colonial writers. John Ngugi from Kenya argued for the importance of a ‘decolonialization of the mind’ and decided to turn his back on his colonial up-bringing. He changed his name to Ngugi wa Thiong’o and started writing in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. The language discussion remains crucial and has obvious connections to Ashcroft’s discussion on different kinds of resistance to the dominant culture. From an intellectual, if not artistic, point of view, ‘de-linking’ strategies seem to be dead-end streets – unless the work is translated to one of the dominant languages. Ngugi’s long-awaited latest novel, *Muroji wa Kagogo* (Wizard of the Crow), is published in Kenya in four volumes by East African Educational Publishers (2004). The English translation will be published by Pantheon as one entire 1,000 page volume and is scheduled for 2006.

‘Glocalization’ was originally a concept used in Japanese business jargon, but it was adapted by American sociologist Roland Robertson (1992) to describe the dual character of globalization as being globalization and localization at the same time.
“Life & Times of Michael K ... remains a singularly stubborn disturbance in any regime of history and reading. Michael K’s resistance to appropriation corresponds with the novel’s resistance to being enlisted by any specified category, be it political or generic.” (Helgesson 1999: 185)