Literature With Social Teeth
A study of new engagement in contemporary literature

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Vincent Kolenbrander
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By: Vincent Kolenbrander
Student number: 2226677
Education: MA Arts, Culture & Media, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen
Specialization: Literature and Analysis & Criticism
Supervisor: Dr. M. Caracciolo
Second reader: Prof. Dr. E.J. Korthals Altes
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'Sitting in your garage, writing – or pretending to write, while actually watching Kajagoogoo videos – sometimes it makes you feel a little useless. Sometimes you feel like getting out in the world and seeing if you can be useful in some more immediate or tangible way'

– Dave Eggers

‘And I started to think that it is very true what they say, that one half of the world doesn’t know how the other lives’

– François Rabelais quoted by François Bon

‘The point is to show how people live, how they behave, and so on (...) I want to know how people do it, live’

– Arnon Grunberg
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Introduction

‘These days, I don’t have any non-fiction planned. Writing fiction is far more liberating and enjoyable on a daily basis. But I came up as a journalist, and my education was as a journalist, so research, and trying to tell a story that might have an impact – those things will likely always be part of the mix’.¹ This said American novelist Dave Eggers January 2013 in an interview in The Guardian. With these words, Eggers touches upon an important current in contemporary literature which is the subject of this thesis. Increasingly, authors write fictive stories based on non-fictive elements to provide an insight into components of contemporary everyday life. As we can infer from Eggers’s words, the author desires to write stories that might have an impact and may cause an effect in society. The writer claims to engage with the world in an almost journalistic way. In other words, Eggers is suggesting a kind of literature which is rooted in reality and implies a conception of language in which language is an adequate medium to render that reality.

One might call this remarkable, since this has not always been the case in recent literary history. During postmodernism, for example, authors were suspicious of the capacity of language to represent reality. On an ideological level postmodernists rejected the idea that literature should address social or political issues, not to mention that literature was not meant to convey an ethical or moral standpoint. The postmodernist was skeptic and cynical about these aspects, but also suspicious about related concepts like truth and authenticity. Yet, it has been repeatedly argued that the days of postmodernity are behind us now.² Cultural philosophers Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker argue for instance: ‘The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics, and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now’.³ Thus, while there is actually nothing new in the observation that postmodernism is over, it seems interesting and exciting to find out which directions contemporary art forms are taking.

When it comes to literature, it appears fiction writers are making a move towards the actuality, seeking ways to give meaning to contemporary everyday life. On the

¹ Day 2013.
basis of a survey Dutch opinion magazine De Groene Amsterdammer held in 2010, in which they asked Dutch literary critics and writers to select the most influential 21st-century novels, the magazine stated: ‘What seems relevant today, is the actuality. More and more often fiction and non-fiction form an alliance, and increasingly the fear of terrorism and anxieties about migration and the environment appear in literature. The clash between cultures because of globalization is a fertile theme. Many novels are about “the Other”’. So, what this quotation makes evident is that a new era has started in which a new kind of literary engagement is flourishing. Authors seem to have abandoned the premises of postmodernism and feel the need to play a significant role in the public debate. To repeat the words of Dave Eggers, they intend to write novels that might have an impact on society.

What strikes me is that there are interesting questions to raise about this development: How can this literary engagement be understood? How do we underpin this development theoretically? Why do authors want to “interfere” in society? What effects do they desire to cause? What are the (narrative) tools, techniques and strategies by which they attempt to bring about these effects? In my view, these are some important and interesting questions which have not been answered sufficiently by literary scholars; therefore, these questions offer a blueprint for my thesis. By investigating a corpus of contemporary novels and their authors on the basis of these questions, this project further explores and maps the characteristics of this tendency towards engagement in contemporary literature. The central questions which I eventually try to answer is this one: how can this contemporary tendency towards literary engagement be understood theoretically and what are its characteristics?

This thesis seeks to show that a new kind of literary engagement is occurring today and that this development cannot be understood as postmodern. Thus far, only one book-length study has been published on this topic. In this De revanche van de roman [The revenge of the novel] (2009), Thomas Vaessens argued Dutch contemporary fiction writers are taking a new ‘position’ since both what Vaessens characterizes as the latent humanism of modernism and postmodern relativism are outdated. Vaessens calls this new position ‘late-postmodern’. Writers are not turning against postmodernism, hence the prefix ‘late’, but rather than the postmodern deconstruction of meaning, these writers try to find innovative ways to construct meanings in order to make sense of reality. This position suggests a return to engagement, that is to say that authors emphasize the value of their literary work for society and that their novels contribute to societal discussions. As he argues, Dutch contemporary authors ‘desire to

\[4\] De Vries 2010.
engage with society, that is to say, they attempt to be committed, what is expressed in the idea that literary texts in the first place have an important function which exceeds the borders of the literary domain’. What is at stake, to state it baldly, is that late-postmodernist authors desire to achieve some kind of intervention in the public sphere.

Yet, Vaessens bases his study on Dutch literature. However, what I have noticed is that it can be argued this late-postmodernist position applies not only to Dutch literature, but to a broader tendency in Western literature. See for example the novels which are selected in the survey of De Groene Amsterdamer, like Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), *The Human Stain* (2000) by Philip Roth and Michel Houellebecq’s *Platform* (2000). Also literary novels like *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2006) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *Big Brother* (2013) by Lionel Shriver and *De laatkomer* (2013) written by the Belgian novelist Dimitri Verhulst can be mentioned here. What these Western novels have in common is that they are all engaged, in the sense that they touch upon important topics and issues which are relevant for contemporary society. It would be too much to say that all of these authors are late-postmodernists, but it at least indicates that many Western authors seem to prefer to write novels which address contemporary social and political topics, or even take a stance towards moral and ethical positions. In that perspective they diverge from postmodernism.

For this reason, this project will further elaborate on the observations of Vaessens. By investigating a more globally orientated corpus of contemporary writers and their novels, this study aims to define the characteristics of this development in a more detailed way than Vaessens has done in his study. As I shall argue in the next chapter, Vaessens forgets in his study to provide his observations with a clear theoretical basis and therefore it is not always clear what his concept of “engagement” includes, what effects it attempts to achieve, or what the novelty of this engagement is. I find it crucial to address these gaps and I hope to contribute to the discussion about this subject in literary studies by mapping this tendency in contemporary literature in a more detailed and focused way.

The first thing I will do in the next chapter is outline a theoretical framework which could sustain the literary-historical concept of late-postmodernism. In the first place, I will suggest that these late-postmodernists can be distinguished from postmodernists on the basis of their different way of dealing with language. Where postmodernism evolved under the influence of post-structuralist language conceptions and preferred to play and experiment with the possibilities of language, contemporary late-postmodernist fiction writers seem to work

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5 Vaessens 2009, p. 12 (my translation).
from a conception of language in which the referential ability of language is no longer problematic. Instead, these fiction writers realize they can use language in such a way that they could have an impact on society. As we shall see, the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein could serve as a valuable context to understand the attempts of the contemporary authors of my thesis. By shedding light on Wittgenstein’s conceptions of language, I shall argue that late-postmodernism could be considered as a specific kind of language-game: ‘late-postmodernist language-game’. Gradually, it shall become clear that late-postmodernism deals with language with different attitudes, intentions and goals.

In the second part of this first chapter I will pay some attention to the notion of ‘literary engagement’. Given that this notion is at the center of this contemporary tendency, it seems necessary to provide it with a theoretical context in order to say something about the way this engagement is manifesting today. What is meant by the term ‘literary engagement’? What kind of literature does it imply? What are its characteristics? These are the questions I will tackle.

After the theoretical first chapter, from chapter 2 to chapter 4, I will further explore the characteristics of this shift towards literary engagement of late-postmodernism in a corpus consisting of three novels. These novels, each of which will be discussed in a separate chapter, are What Is the What (2006) by the American novelist Dave Eggers, Daewoo (2004) by the French writer François Bon and Onze oom [Our uncle] (2008) written by Arnon Grunberg, who is from The Netherlands. I intentionally took three novels from three different countries, in order to demonstrate that this revival of engagement could be seen as a more global current in contemporary literature. I selected these novels in the first place on the basis of the argument that several critics and scholars associated these authors with engagement. A second criteria, to hark back to the opening quotation of Dave Eggers, is that these authors are all characterized by a journalistic attitude towards the world. This is an important aspect of my thesis, because as we shall see, the literary engagement of these authors is driven by an interest in journalistic practices.

One of the claims I will make in the following pages is that late-postmodernism can be distinguished from postmodernism on the basis of the authors’ stated intentions. Therefore, in the case-studies I will in the first place give a more detailed picture of the intentions of the authors: What do they expect of literature? What effects do they expect of their fiction? And what narrative and rhetorical techniques, tools, and strategies do they deploy to attain their goals? By raising these questions I hope to explore some characteristics of the ‘language game’ these contemporary fiction writers display. Each case-study has more or less a similar
structure. I will start with a short introduction, then I will look at the author’s intentions as expressed in interviews and analyze the working methods adopted by the author in order to write his novel. After that I will focus more on the artefact itself, which is among other things the narrative structure and the thematic components of the text. Finally, in the last part of this thesis, chapter 5, it is time for some conclusions by formulating a list of some of the characteristics of the prototypical late-postmodernist author and its novel. Here I will also try to find an explanation for this movement authors make towards society. An interesting point here is that authors seem not so much to intentionally abandon postmodernism, but rather to consider the novel a remedy against their dissatisfaction with contemporary journalistic discourse.
Chapter 1
The late-postmodernist language game

In this thesis I build on the assumption that postmodernism is over, a claim which multiple scholars have made, as I have shown in my introductory words. Therefore, some essential questions arise: If postmodernism is over, than what is exactly over? Through what alternative concept can contemporary fiction be understood? What theoretical frame would clarify this kind of fiction and in what perspective can it not be understood as postmodernist? In this first chapter I would like to touch upon these questions by laying a theoretical foundation for this central idea that: a) fiction writers intend to provide insight into components of contemporary everyday life, b) they often blur the borderlines between fiction and reality (non-fiction) by making a step towards the province of the journalist and c) that consequently a revived literary engagement is emerging since fiction writers try to intervene in reality in order to play a role of significance in society. It is my proposition here this current can no longer be considered as postmodern. This, of course, is not the same as to say that all literary novels which appear today are by definition not postmodern, but I do believe the tendency I will identify here has an empirical reality.

So far, literary scholars did not succeed to answer, at least in my view, an essential question about this discussion: what is the theoretical basis of this movement in contemporary literature towards reality and engagement? When we take a look at postmodernism, we saw this literary-historical periodization developed under the (language) philosophy of Barthes and Derrida, who regarded language as an internally regulated system which lacks reference with external reality. What interests me is the question of what kind of language conception could serve as a useful background by which the attempts of engaged contemporary writers might be understood, since I believe a post-structuralist conception of language is not valid any more for the contemporary texts which I address in this thesis.

What first of all seems relevant for me to do in this chapter is shortly pay some attention to postmodernism in literature to get a sense of what is meant with the phrase ‘postmodernism is over’. Of course this is not an easy task, given the fact that postmodernism in itself is a much disputed concept which cannot be captured in one definition. On the other hand, I believe it is not impossible to focus on some general notions which are associated with literary postmodernism. Subsequently, I will propose the alternative theoretical framework of
“late-postmodernism” which replaces the key principles of postmodernism. We shall see here that the authors who have my attention work from a conception of language which links up with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ideas about language. As we go along, it will also become clear in what way a theory of literary engagement fits into this conception of language by returning to the origins of this notion, the French ‘littérature engagée’.

**Postmodernism**

In the introduction to the book *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Relativism* (2011), a recent study to the legacy of postmodernism in European literature and the new paths writers and critics have explored after postmodernism’s ending, Yra van Dijk and Thomas Vaessens argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to give a well-defined definition of postmodernism. For them, postmodernism is a literary period with ‘many faces’ and it is a ‘discursive field’ rather than a ‘coherent concept’. Van Dijk and Veassens contend that this ‘discursive field’ centers on the following idea:

Postmodern thought evolved parallel to and under the influence of French post-structuralist theory with protagonists such as Barthes, Derrida and Lyotard. It rose against the great Theories of Everything which we had begun to take or granted in our modern Western world as the bedrock of our thinking and behavior. These theories seemed universal in scope, but postmodernism revealed them to be ideological constructs that needed interpretation and deconstruction. Values are not universal, but context-bound. Not discovered in some Platonic sky, but fashioned by historically and socially situated human beings. For these reason, values object to change. A word used in this context is relativism: postmodernism relativizes Western cultural values.

I think this is, in short, what postmodernism in literature is about. Yet in this description there are two important points to which we can pay some more attention: the influence of French post-structuralist theory and the term which is mentioned in the last sentence, ‘relativism’.

**The postmodern language conception, relativism and cynicism**

As Van Dijk and Vaessens indicate, postmodernist thought has been shaped by the ideas of French post-structuralist thinkers, such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. At the center

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6 Vaessens & Van Dijk 2011, p. 9.
7 Ibid.
of the thought of these post-structuralist theorists is their attack on language’s referential capacity. According to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who laid the foundation for structuralism (and, indirectly, for post-structuralism), language is arbitrary and based on a number of structural opposition. Post-structuralists radicalized this view by stating that language does not refer to the objective reality, to things in the world, so that language is in fact an internal system. This means that the meaning of words refer to other words and we are able know the meaning of words because their meaning is captured in a system. Thus, according to post-structuralism referentiality is merely based on an (arbitrary) agreement within a linguistic system without possessing a direct relationship with external reality.\textsuperscript{8} If language is just an internal system, post-structuralists argued, that is determined by a system of signs in relation with other signs, and this internally regulated system lacks reference with external reality, then the use of language is nothing more than a game consisting in an infinite play with significance, for the reason that the referent only exists within the arbitrary linguistic system.

According to Linda Hutcheon, this problematizing of an unproblematic trust in referential ability of language was postmodernism’s main occupation in literature.\textsuperscript{9} From within this underlying conception of language, authors intended to undermine any straightforward claim of referentiality of their texts by means of metafictional and self-reflexive strategies. By doing so, reference to the order of the ‘real’ world is often annulled or disrupted in postmodern fiction. Also Brian McHale agrees with Hutcheon that this is characteristic for postmodernist fiction. In his classical study \textit{Postmodernist Fiction} (1989) he argues that postmodernist fiction prioritizes ontological play by exploring and blending possible universes. Therefore postmodern fiction foregrounds questions such as ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ? What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries are violated?’\textsuperscript{10} In postmodernism the familiar mimetic relationship between the text and the real world – i.e., words represent things in the real, physical world – is constantly problematized and defamiliarized.

\textsuperscript{8} For this thought Saussure used the concepts of “signifier” and “signified”. Saussure claimed that the relation between the “signifier” (the \textit{words}) and its referent, “signified”, (the thing in the \textit{world} to which the reference is made by the “signifier”) is a matter of language. Saussure demonstrated there is no such objective relation between \textit{word} and \textit{world}. He emphasized that the nature of the relation between referent and world is actually characterized by arbitrariness.

\textsuperscript{9} See Linda Hutcheon, \textit{A Poetics of Postmodernism} (1988).

\textsuperscript{10} McHale 1989, p. 10.
In postmodernism, the author’s attitude has often been characterized as ‘relativistic’ and ‘cynical’. As Van Dijk and Vaessens also point out in their description of postmodernism, relativism is an attitude of postmodernist fiction writers in which they ‘relativize Western cultural values’. The relativistic and cynical attitude of the postmodernist may be best summarized with the ‘anything goes’ mentality. According to Vaessens, this ‘anything goes’ can be understood as ‘a cultural relativism which refuses to accept universal criteria for fair or morally responsible actions and thinking’. Thus, the relativism and cynicism of the postmodernist author denotes in particular an attitude of indifference towards ethics, moral and values. The postmodernist is skeptic towards the cultural tradition and his indifference towards social matters demonstrates a position which can be characterized as disengaged and noncommittal.

**Towards a poetics of late-postmodernism**

This is of course only a sketchy and simplified description of literary postmodernism and the attitude of postmodernist writers, but in short I think these are some aspects which have been overcome in the mindset of contemporary fiction writers. Postmodernist relativism and cynicism seems to be abandoned and exchanged for notions such as humanity, engagement, truth, and sincerity. As I already mentioned in the introduction, for Thomas Vaessens this development means the advent of ‘late-postmodernism’ in Dutch literature, which implies an emphasis on a new engagement. ‘Authors seek new ways of exercising their trade in order to revitalize a marginalized literature. They are no longer ashamed of having certain expectations of (the public effects of) their work and they strive to strip writing of its permissiveness,’ Vaessens argues. The late-postmodernist distances him- or herself from postmodernist isolation by taking an active, involved and engaged attitude and an interest in ethical and political issues. This implies a revitalization of the novel in the sense that the authors see their novels as playing a valuable role in social questions. The novels of late-postmodernists are intended to forge new bonds with the real world: ‘They are open to the world of today’. What may seem paradoxical is that Vaessens calls the writers in his study ‘late-postmodern’, which may be taken to suggest that these authors continue the

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11 Vaessens 2011, p. 11
12 Ibid, p. 22.
14 Ibid, p. 208-09.
postmodernist heritage in some way, rather than breaking with it. But Vaessens explains he calls these authors ‘late-postmodern’ because they do not want to turn against postmodernism by attacking the ideas of Barthes, Foucault or Derrida. ‘They endorse postmodern criticism of the universal pretensions of liberal humanism, but they are also forced to conclude that it has failed to put the historical, political and ethical dimensions of literature back on stage,’ Vaessens says. Elsewhere, Ulla Haselstein is making the same point: ‘authenticity is making a comeback, in the guises of memory, ethics, religion, the new sincerity, and the renewed interest in “real things”. Although sometimes envisioned as the rejection of postmodernism, the “new” authenticity remains profoundly shaped by postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence’.

What emerges from both quotations is that contemporary authors do not attack postmodernism, but rather incorporate it in order to find a new position.

As said, the literary-historical model of late-postmodernism is based on the situation in Dutch literature, but I think it can be seen in the context of a broader, more global tendency in contemporary literature. I will try to demonstrate this claim with case studies of three contemporary novels in the following chapters. However, there are some questions left which require my attention before embarking on the case studies. Vaessens’s ideas about a renewed form of literary engagement seems to me convincing and meaningful, but his observations on this “new engagement” lack a clear theoretical basis. This is for instance also noticed by literary scholars Ernst van den Hemel et al. who argue that ‘Vaessens’s call for a new form of engagement is convincing and necessary, but the implementation leaves much to be desired. Vaessens fails to answer key questions such as: how to provide this new engagement with a theoretical basis? What are its limits? What is the intended effect?’ I agree with this criticism, since Vaessens does not sustain his observations of a theoretical foundation and nowhere does he specify what this new ‘literary engagement’ exactly includes or what the purposes or borders of it are, and therefore his study is from time to time a bit vague and ungrounded.

Yet a clear theoretical foundation for this tendency in contemporary literary towards commitment and engagement seems necessary and desirable. Therefore, what I would like to do in the following pages is to offer a theoretical framework which functions as a context to

15 Vaessens 2011, p. 22.
understand this current in contemporary literature. The point where I start is my observation that the authors which are the subject of my investigation no longer build on the language conception of post-structuralism, which is an important principle of postmodernism. So, the point which has my interest first is what kind of conception of language could replace postmodern ideas about language in post-postmodernist writing. This seems important to me for two reasons. In the first place conceptions about the ability of language form the basis of the whole enterprise of the fiction writer. Secondly, a theoretical basis could serve as a useful background in order to get a grip on the attempts of fiction writers to make sense of the contemporary world and the human existence.

A Wittgensteinian perspective on language

What we have argued thus far is that late-postmodernist writers exhibit an altered conception of the function of literature in society. This implies also a shifted emphasis in the function and capacity of language. Opposed to postmodernists, they do not deny that there is a relation between text and world, nor are they concerned with the postmodern ontological enterprise of modeling complex and pluralistic ontological landscapes. Instead, we observe that fiction writers utilize their novels as instruments to be engaged with reality, they commit themselves with the community in which they play a part by dealing with issues that are characteristic for our time. It is evident they do not any longer doubt or problematize the ability of language to state something about reality, as postmodernists did. What strikes me is that the way these contemporary fiction writers cope with language can be interpreted with the ideas about language of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Today, Wittgenstein’s late philosophical work has regained its interest in literary and philosophical studies, and therefore the merits of his *Philosophical Investigations* are today maybe more present than before. It might be good to notice that it is impossible to do justice to the extensive philosophy of Wittgenstein, but more important in my view is to sketch his ideas in broad strokes and to point out how his philosophy can offer a valuable alternative for postmodern and post-structuralist thought.

It might be useful to start by saying that Wittgenstein is not interested in language in the way (post-)structuralism is. For Wittgenstein the meaning of language is not created within an internal regulated system of signifiers, but to his ideas, language is in the first place

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a social and a cultural practice. What matters to him is that the individual is embedded in a social structure wherein the participants negotiate and come to agreement about the meaning of language. The meanings of words are thus not constituted by the objects they refer to, nor by mental representation; in its place, according to Wittgenstein meanings are determined in a language ‘game’ played by a community of participants. To paraphrase the interpretation of Christopher Prendergast, game here stands not for the postmodernist language game in the sense of its infinite postponement of significance. In Wittgensteinian sense, using language is a ‘game’ as a social practice wherein the participants negotiate and come to agreement about the meaning of words and the conditions that constitute the rules.\(^\text{19}\) Therefore Wittgenstein says: ‘the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form’.\(^\text{20}\) With this latter notion, ‘life-form’ or often called ‘form of life’, Wittgenstein expresses the idea that every language-user is embedded within a life-form of groups of individuals which share common ‘standards of representation’: ‘the criteria our culture has developed in its efforts to forge a shared sense of its world’.\(^\text{21}\) What this quotation makes clear is that every use of language by the participants (if played following the rules) has to be meaningful; it is what binds them together, and meaning exists because communities have already provided some pre-existing structures.

From this Wittgensteinian perspective, language is not an internally regulated system which endlessly refers to each other, but an instrument which is used in a social and cultural context in order to construct and share standards of representation to render and grasp the world.\(^\text{22}\) The one who utilizes language is able to connect the self to a form of life, that is to say, he engages the self with a community of speakers which share a sense of the world. In the given language structure, the participant is free to play a language game with the common structures, but this game will always be meaningful. This distinguishes the Wittgensteinian language game from postmodernist play. Therefore Wittgenstein says: ‘Do not say: “There isn’t a ‘last’ definition.” That is just as if you chose to say: “There isn’t a last house in this road; one can always build an additional one”’.\(^\text{23}\) Indeed, the postmodernist would say that there isn’t a last definition, whereas in Wittgenstein’s view the participants would negotiate about a possible meaning or agree that there is meaning possible.

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\(^\text{19}\) Prendergast 1986, p. 73.
\(^\text{21}\) Gibson 2007, p. 67.
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid, p. 66.
To connect this excursion into the philosophy of language with literature, the fiction writer is in this context in the valuable position that he is able to interfere in a *form of life*, since the fiction writer is, by means of his language-use, embedded in a social and cultural context which has its standards of representation to render and grasp the world. As John Gibson says, ‘literary fiction that offers no representations of reality will not on that count alone be isolated from reality,’ to which I would like to add: the fiction writer which does offer ‘representations of reality’ is able to construct, negotiate or share concepts with which we render and grasp our reality.²⁴

*The late-postmodernist language game*

Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language serves as a useful background for the frame of late-postmodernism. These authors realize that they are embedded in a social and cultural structure and that language is their instrument to intervene in the fundamental concepts which shape a *form of life*, such as politics, morality, ethics, or existential topics. This counts of course also for the postmodernist fiction writer, who is part of the social practice too and makes use of these same language of a group of individuals who share the same structures. Yet I believe the language play of postmodernist and the language game of the late-postmodernist could be defined as two different types of language-games. Whereas the postmodernist played a language game which was mainly based on the exploration of and experimentation with the possibilities of language, the late-postmodernist plays a language game in which the writer sees language, in line with the language philosophy of Wittgenstein, as an useful instrument to construct and share standards of representation to render and grasp the world. Consequently, this implies that the fiction writer is as an important participant of a social practice, for the reason that his language use – his fiction – is meant as a binding agent to connect with a community of speakers. In this way, the writer is able to interfere in our collective understanding reality.

*Literary engagement*

As one may notice, this conception of language matches a new form of late-postmodernist literary engagement, since these ideas form a interpretative context for the development that authors commit themselves with society and desire that their texts play some role of

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²⁴ Gibson 2007, p. 69.
significance in the public sphere. The question remaining, and this is what I would like to tackle now, is how this concept of literary engagement might be understood.

In general, literary engagement is a term which applies to literature which is dedicated to social matters and issues. The authors of such ‘engaged’ texts value their texts more on the basis of its function outside the literary domain, so in society, rather than the intrinsic aspects of it. The concept of literary engagement is in particular present in French literature during the period of the 1950s and 1960s under the term ‘littérature engagée’. Jean-Paul Sartre theorized the concept in his book What Is Literature? (1947). Sartre outlines his view that literature should have an impact on society and that the novel is an instrument which must encourage social and political ‘action’. By ‘action’ Sartre means the writer’s purpose to bring about change in the world. It is the task of the writer, who is embedded within society, to be concerned with existential as well as social and political issues of its time. He can do so by using language. Sartre proposes: ‘The “engaged” writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change’.25 This quote demonstrates Sartre’s confidence in the power of words. Through words the writer is able to influence society, criticizing (existential) issues and offering new solutions or insights. The function of the writer for Sartre ‘is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world and that nobody may say that he is innocent of what it’s all about. And since he has once engaged himself in the universe of language, he can never again pretend that he cannot speak’.26 What is implied here is that the ‘engaged’ writer has in essence two tasks: 1) the writer engages with the world and his novel is his instrument to that end and 2) the novel must encourage the reader to engage with the world and his environment, so that he becomes aware of issues in the world. With other words, what Sartre has in mind is the idea that literature includes a radical authorship which takes place in the public domain.

Yet Sartre does not further specify what this authorship exactly implies. More useful here are some characteristics outlined by Liesbeth Korthals Altes on the basis of Benoît Denis’ study Littérature et engagement (2000). These characteristics offer some more concrete idea of engaged literature and an engaged authorship. In the first place engaged literature ‘is meant as an act, accomplished in the public realm, and this is stressed by various kinds of (rhetorical, practical, medial) devices and topoi. For instance, it will be emphasized that writing means taking risks, that it springs from a sense of urgency’.27 Secondly, engaged

25 Sartre 1949, p. 23.
27 Korthals Altes 2007, p. 264.
literature involves a personal investment of the author: ‘an engaged writer is one who has explicitly taken on a series of commitments with regard to the collectivity’.\textsuperscript{28} Thirdly, the work of the engaged writer ‘takes a stand on political, social and/or ethical issues’ so that, and this is the fourth characteristic, the novel ‘presents a powerful address to a public (…) whereby a reader should develop a new vision of the state of affairs and/or show more personal commitment, or even become active for or against some cause (civic effect)’.\textsuperscript{29} These are some criteria which will prove useful in the identification of how this new engagement is manifesting itself in the contemporary novels.

\textit{A step towards journalism}

As I already indicated in the introduction, an important claim to be argued in the following chapters is that this new literary engagement is driven by the author’s interest in journalism. These writers are literally becoming journalists in the sense that they also write journalistic pieces, yet they see themselves mainly as fiction writers and purposefully write pieces of fiction: novels. Importantly, all the authors of my corpus – and this was one reason for choosing them as case studies – cherish an engaged attitude towards the world which is quite similar to the attitude of the journalist. What this ‘journalistic attitude’ precisely is will be fleshed out in greater detail in the first case study; for now it will suffice to say that the late-postmodernist author displays an attitude which is akin to the open-minded attitude of the journalist. These writers are not tied to their desks or locked up in an ivory tower, but with an inquisitiveness that we normally associate with journalism, these novelists explore the world, they encounter and experience what is out there. As I shall try to demonstrate, this attitude towards the world is crucial for the way contemporary authors play the ‘late-postmodernist language game’.

In the next chapters I will examine the work of three contemporary authors which, on the basis of their literary works, deserve the label of “late-postmodernist” as defined above: Dave Eggers, François Bon and Arnon Grunberg. In the case studies I will explore the way the authors play what I have defined in this chapter as the ‘late-postmodernist language game’. Since I believe that the late-postmodernist writer differs from the postmodernist on the basis of his intentions, I will in the first place give a more detailed picture of the intentions the authors: What does their engagement look like in practice? What do they expect of (their)

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Korthals Altes 2007, p. 265.
literature? Why do they prefer to write novels instead of non-fictional texts? What effects do they expect of their novels? And what narrative and rhetorical techniques, tools, and strategies do they deploy to attain their goals?

I will try to answer these questions through a two-pronged approach. In the first place I will make use of text-analysis, focusing on the textual aspects of the novels by investigating the narrative and rhetorical techniques, tools, and strategies the authors use in their narratives. I will also make use of peri- and paratextual analysis, a notion of literary theorist Gérard Genette which designates texts in the immediate surroundings of the primary text, such as the epigraph or an introduction inside the novel (paratexts) or interviews or articles of the authors which give an interpretative framework of the primary text (peritexts). I consider peri- and paratextual analysis as a valuable methodology, because I believe these texts offer indispensable information about the attitude, intentions and beliefs of authors which are fruitful in the examination of their works. Yet, in literary theory it has not always been self-evident to concentrate on the author and his intentions. Wimsatt and Beardsley argued for several reasons that it is problematic to use the author’s intentions for literary interpretation and they coined this problem with the term ‘The Intentional Fallacy’. But one can think here also of the formalists during the 1920s, who focused in their literary analysis purely on the formal aspects of the literary texts. The structuralists of the 1960s and 1970s also left the author outside of their literary analysis; they argued the author is not the single person who put meaning into a text. Roland Barthes even declared the death of the author, by which he meant that it is not merely up to the author to create meaning; according to Barthes, the meaning of the text does not reflect the author’s intentions.

However, from my perspective, authors do matter for audiences. Regardless of the normative assumptions of structuralists, in many contexts we interpret literary texts by constructing an image of the author. Today, authorial intentionality seems to have regained interest in narrative theory; David Herman has, for example, argued for the role of what he calls the author’s ‘intentional stance.’ For this study it seems important to me to pay attention to the intentions of the author, since I am to a certain extent interested in the posture, the values and beliefs of these contemporary fiction writers. And I think that by focusing on the way these authors present themselves in the public sphere may give a valuable insight into

33 Herman 2008, p. 233-60.
the meanings, values and beliefs these authors try to convey. This may even be more relevant in contemporary culture. We find ourselves in a time where the authors’ activity in the public domain has considerably increased. More than before, authors appear in talk shows on TV and radio, they write blogs and are active on social media like Twitter and Facebook, they tour around their countries to promote their books, they give readings and lectures, they perform at (literary) events and festivals. In contemporary society the writer has thus become an important figure in the public domain, taking active part in the public debate. In this light, perhaps we can even cautiously say that the author is currently more ‘alive’ than ever.
Chapter 2

Making the world a better place
Dave Eggers and What Is the What

Introduction

Under the title ‘It was just boys walking’, the American author Dave Eggers published in 2004 a lengthy piece of literary journalism in the literary magazine The Believer about the life story of Valentino Achak Deng, a man who fled his village in Sudan in 1987 at the age of six when the Sudanese civil war broke out. Deng finally made it to the US after a devastating ramble of more than thirteen years across Africa. Eggers went with Deng back to his hometown in Africa, looking for his family. The report that Eggers then wrote about the trip was meant to be an excerpt of his forthcoming book titled What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng.

But when the project two years later was finished and the book published, it became clear that some remarkable things were changed. While the excerpt Eggers published in the literary magazine was evidently a non-fictional, journalistic account of the life of Valentino Achak Deng, the book that appeared in 2006 was no longer non-fiction, but Deng’s life story remodeled as a novel and filled up, as Eggers admitted, with fictional elements. Strikingly enough, Eggers decided to put the ‘real’ material in a fictional mode of utterance.

This novel makes an interesting case study for my thesis in that with this book Eggers forges a striking alliance between fiction and reality, one which is interesting to focus on in greater detail in the context of the contemporary kind of writing I am investigating. Paradoxically, non-fictive devices are not accurate enough to describe reality, therefore the author turns to the toolbox of the novel writer in order to get closer to reality. On the other hand, pure fiction is also insufficient to approximate reality and therefore the author is adopting an almost journalistic attitude in which he focuses on issues taking place in society. What is it in this case that the fiction writer can do but the journalist or the non-fiction writer cannot? And a related question would be: what is it that the journalist/non-fiction writer does that the fiction-writer also should do? In the following pages of this chapter I will be exploring the characteristics of this newfound literary engagement and its step towards reality.

34 See Kirschling 2007 or Eggers 2007.
How does the author use language to forge a (new) relationship between text and world? By means of what intentions and through which devices (narrative, rhetorical) does he achieve this? What role is journalism fulfilling? And also: what makes Eggers opt for an interaction between the fields of fiction and reality and what impact does it aim to have?

**Eggers the journalist**

As I said above, Eggers intended to write a non-fictional account of Deng’s life in literary journalistic form; thus, the book has a very strong journalistic basis. It is an approach Eggers often adopts, because Eggers received a journalistic education and in this way acquired the principles of journalism, so it is not unusual for Eggers to appeal to the tools of the journalist: he frequently used this strategy for other books, like *Surviving Justice* (2005) and *Zeitoun* (2009).

Firstly, it will be useful to say something more about this ‘journalistic attitude’ and methods, because as we shall see in this and the following chapters, it will be a returning concept in my discussion of these contemporary authors. So for clarity, it will be good to define what I mean when I argue that the author is acting like a journalist. In order to present a ‘universal’ conception of what the journalistic attitude comprises it seems especially fruitful to give (a quick) summary of some of Bill Kovach’s and Tom Rosenstiel’s theory of journalism, who have outlined some general principles that underlie the central purpose of journalism. In the first place, they argue the journalist’s first obligation is to the truth, something that can be understood as ‘getting the facts right’ and the pursue of ‘accuracy’ and ‘fairness’. 35 This means in other words that the given information can be verified by several sources and therefore they say that ‘journalism alone is focused first on getting what happened down right’. 36 Giving a voice to the voiceless is according to Kovach and Rosenstiel an important aspect of journalism, because as they argue, ‘journalism’s first loyalty is to citizens’. 37 Therefore the journalist displays a commitment with community, because journalism is an ‘effort to understand the whole community’, 38 so the journalist also bears a certain responsibility, for instance the responsibility to offer a representative picture of certain groups of individuals. Kovach and Rosenstiel further stress that the journalist’s task is to

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36 Ibid., p. 71.
37 Ibid., p. 51.
38 Ibid., p. 193.
uncover new information and placing this information in a context, and traditionally the journalist is making use of tools like interviewing, seeking out witnesses and researching activities in order to gather new information. Yet, as we read in Robert S. Boynton’s introduction to ‘New New Journalism’, in recent years more and more journalists are working with so called innovative ‘immersion strategies’, which is a specific research strategy in which the journalist is immersing his- or herself in a certain situation and investigates the event from the inside.

Interesting to see is that Eggers’s non-fiction books Surviving Justice and Zeitoun have emerged from such a journalistic method and immersive strategies and also his novel What Is the What springs from this kind of approach. Let us now have a more detailed look at how Eggers applied this method to write this particular novel. How does the author bring this engaged, journalistic attitude into practice and how does this working method affect or influence the narrative text?

In an article that he wrote on The Guardian as “companion” to the novel, Eggers stated that he wanted to help a the Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng – a so called Lost Boy – by telling a story about all he has been through in his turbulent life. After Eggers and Deng agreed to note down Deng’s story, they started the process of recording the story which consisted in ‘spending days and weeks together’, talking ‘for hundreds of hours on the phone’, and they ‘sent thousands of emails back and forth’. Eggers is clearly adopting the eyes of the journalist when he says: ‘I assumed I would simply interview Valentino, straighten the narrative out a bit, ask some follow-up questions, and then assemble the book from his words’. But it appeared however that there are limitations to the method of interviewing the eye-witness. Eggers gradually came to doubt the reliability of Deng’s story. He called Deng’s memory of his time in Africa ‘very spotty’ and ‘full of holes’, because Deng was only six when he fled from his hometown. Therefore Eggers switched to more immersive fieldwork. To get a better notion of what actually happened and where it happened, they visited Deng’s hometown in South-Sudan twice, Eggers interviewed other Lost Boys about their stories, appealed to human right reports and newspaper articles, and delved into the history of Sudan.

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39 Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, p. 117.
40 Boynton 2005, p. xiii.
41 From now on I will indicate the novel with the abbreviation ‘What’.
42 ‘Lost Boys’ became the generic term for the Sudanese men who were forced to flee their villages in south-Sudan when the civil war raged and never returned home. Before they settled in countries all over the world, they spent thirteen years of their youth in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps.
43 Eggers 2007.
44 Ibid.
and the civil war. The guiding principles of the immersion Eggers underwent can thus be described as interviewing witnesses, spatial investigation, and documentation.

Eggers declares he ‘had heard of the Lost Boys’ because ‘there had been a slew of articles about them in the American media’, 45 but to tell the story with any degree of accuracy, he says in another interview, he chose such an immersive approximation because he had ‘no frame of reference’. 46 What we see here is a very interesting aspect and symptomatic for the author’s turn towards reality: the novel is a reaction on journalistic discourse. The author says he was acquainted with the situation of the Lost Boys through what Doležel would call ‘world-constructing texts’ or in short ‘C-texts’. We use such texts to give meaning to the world, such as history books or journalistic articles, and these texts are representations of the actual world which can be judged true or false (i.e., falsified). Doležel opposes world-constructing texts to ‘world-imagining texts’, like fictional texts, which have a different truth condition. I-texts ‘are outside truth-valuation; their sentences are neither true or false’. 47 On the basis of these journalistic ‘C-texts’, Eggers says he has certain ideas about the Lost Boys and hence a certain picture of reality, yet the purpose of his journalistic attitude is to bring to light new aspects and negotiate the familiar frames of reference which are provided by C-texts, in this case by the media. We can thus observe a certain media criticism in the author’s intention to adopt a journalistic way of working in order to seek for his novel new ‘standards of representation’, which are, as discussed in previous chapter, common representations with which we make sense of our world. 48

The purpose of Eggers’s investigation is to search for new ways of seeing the Lost Boys. It is striking how important the role of language is for the author’s personal investment and involvement in the stories of others. Here is a quote from Eggers:

(…) when you give someone a chance to speak and you say, ‘You are going to have control of your narrative; we’re going to listen as long as you’ll talk; we’re not going to just hit and run and get a few quotes and walk away,’” then people get very serious and willing to open up and tell their whole story. Without that, what they went through—what they saw, what their ancestors went through, what their family went through—could be easily forgotten. That’s the worst crime of all—not only to have suffered, but that it never

45 Eggers 2007.
48 Gibson 2007, p.63.
Eggers demonstrates in this passage how essential it is for him to make sense of the world by staying in touch with other people and by sincerely trying to understand the stories human beings tell one another. In Eggers’s view it is the task of the writer to become involved in this process; the writer is capable to derive a coherent and convincing narrative from other people’s verbally circulated stories. By actively participating in the language game that people play in real life to give meaning to their world and their existence, the author can find out what it is like to be a human and what the world is like. The author thus acts as a sort of mediator or intermediary in service of the community. I would argue that this approach is very Wittgensteinian: the author realizes he is part of a social structure and by an engaged, journalistic attitude the writer engages the self with a community of speakers which share a sense of the world.

World-constructing elements

Let us turn more specifically to the novelistic dimension of Eggers’s work. Why does he turn to the arsenal of the novelist? How does the journalist’s immersive attitude influence the novelist’s writing? What are the literary qualities deployed to get closer to reality?

On first sight it would seem that Eggers’s novel weaves two plot-lines together. The main plot is the present-tense narration of the character named Valentino Achak Deng, named after the flesh-and-blood person. In this plot we follow two days of the protagonist’s life in Atlanta, where he – in his imagination – is telling his life story to the random people who cross his path in the hope that these people will treat him with more respect if they were aware of the suffering he has gone through. The story continually switches back and forth to the second plot; the narration of Deng’s past where the I-narrator returns to his personal memories of the beginning of Sudan’s civil war in his hometown Marial Bai, followed by an epic journey through Sudan toward refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, and finally, the crossing to the ‘promised land’, the US. But once he reaches America, the suffering is not over. The protagonist encounters unexpected struggles within Western society and thus the US becomes just another chapter to his history of suffering.

49 Sharrock 2009.
There is, however, a third plot that we may add in light of Eggers’s journalistic fieldwork, one that is subtly interwoven with the other two and less explicitly present. This is the plot about the sociopolitical history of Sudan from the mid-1980s until the early twenty-first-century. It is in relation to this plot-line that Eggers’s research on the facts and history of the Sudanese civil war affects the novel’s blurring between fiction and reality most directly. What we encounter here is that the author crosses the boundary between the fictive and the real by placing bits of non-fictional, ‘world-constructing texts’ within the world of the novel which is, as I have argued above, a world-imagining text. The narrative technique Eggers then deploys to convey a good deal of recent African history is by framing it in dialogues, by having the I-narrator Deng narrate it, or by embedding it in stories told by other Lost Boys-characters. Let us for example have a quick look at the following conversation between the character Dut Majok, who is a teacher, and the protagonist where this point becomes apparent:

You’re sure you want to hear?
Deng and I insisted we did.

– Okay then. Where should I start? Okay. There is a man named Suwar al-Dahab. He is the minister of defense for the government in Khartoum.

Deng interrupted. – What is Khartoum?

Dut sighed. – Really? You don’t know this? That’s where the government is, Deng. The central government of the country. Of all of Sudan. You don’t know this?

This is only a brief passage, but what is at stake here is that non-fictional information is interwoven in a fictional conversation between two fictional characters. In this way such non-fictional, world-constructing material (such as events of the civil war, the clarification of the involved persons of the government in Khartoum and parties like the SPLA, the murahaleen, or Muslim militias) finds its way into the novel, so that the narrative offers an insight into the actual history of Sudan. As a result, it can be argued these non-fictional elements contribute to provoking an intense ‘make-believing’ reader response. As Gibson explains, what distinguishes world-imagining (fictional) texts from world-constructing (non-fictional) texts is ‘the attitude we adopt toward the content of what we read: make-belief in one case, belief in the other’.51 I would say the reference to these non-fictional texts function as a rhetorical

50 Eggers 2006, p. 122.
51 Gibson 2007, p. 162.
strategy to convince the reader of the credibility of the narrative and its legitimacy in the actual world. The narrative as a whole attempts to elicit a strong make-believing reading response given that the reader is invited to hold the narrative for ‘true’ since the text is full of elements which can be verified and events, as we shall see later, which according to the author really have happened. In this sense What might prove confusing as it oscillates between world-imagining and world-constructing sentences, that is to say between imagined (fictional) and verifiable non-fictional elements. In this way the novel problematizes the distinction between fact and fiction, between journalism and literature, since Sudan’s macro-history runs like a thread to the narrative and serves as the context of the micro-history (i.e. the personal and subjective stories within a larger history) of the protagonist/I-narrator and of the other embedded stories of the Lost Boys.

**Aesthetic illusion**

What we have seen thus far is that the author returns to the domain of the novelist by shaping the collected information and the gained experiences in a fictional context—which means, to follow Peter Lamarque’s and Stein Haugom Olsen’s distinction between fiction and non-fiction, that Eggers’s fictional narrative is a ‘rule-governed practice’ consisting in elements such as ‘imagination’, ‘make-believe’, ‘play’, ‘narrative structuring’, and so forth. This creates an attitude (known as “fictive stance”) in which the reader is invited to make-believe truth and reference. The questions which are interesting to raise here are the following: why the movement back to the field of fiction? Isn’t it paradoxical that the author appeals to a ‘false’ instrument (the fictional text) to convey a true or real story? In an interview Eggers declares the following about it:

> All these things in the book — the facts of the war, the movement of people and troops — are historically accurate, but what’s necessary to make a book compelling is shaping it in an artful way (...). I wanted — and Valentino wanted — the book to come alive, and not be dry.  

What we see here is that Eggers alludes to the capacity of fiction to affect, persuade, and compel the reader, a quality that non-fiction is lacking (in Eggers’s opinion) because in non-

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52 Lamarque and Olsen 1994, p. 30-3  
53 Ibid, p. 77.  
54 Kirschling 2007; my emphasis.
fiction books ‘you don’t get to hear the person’s voice; you don’t get them as individuals’.
What Eggers is saying here ties in with some empirical evidence of psychological studies about the ability of literature to persuade or even change the reader. As Jēmeljan Hakemulder for instance argues in his study The Moral Laboratory, literary narratives increase our knowledge and understanding of the human psyche, for the reason that placing oneself in the position of characters can lead to insights into the minds of others; in this way literature enhances an awareness of others and ourselves. Given the quotation, what appears to be important to Eggers is exactly this persuasiveness of literature to have a more significant effect on readers’ worldview, so we might say that the intended effect of this novel is to intervene in the lives of as many people as possible. As Eggers puts it by himself, he wanted the American and Western audience to know ‘what he [Valentino Achak Deng] and basically every other immigrant to the U.S., whether legal or not, is going through now’. And this larger public can only be reached, Eggers implies, when the book is shaped in an ‘artful’ way and when it ‘comes alive’ for the audience. So Eggers’s engagement and the literariness of the novel are not necessarily opposed to each other. But what does it exactly mean when the author says that he wanted the book to ‘come alive’? And what do we see of this in the novel?

What has become apparent is that Eggers falls back on the toolbox of the fiction writer because it offers the novelist the means to shape the text in a persuasive or compelling way. With his statement that he wanted the text come alive, the author is thus alluding to the aesthetic potential or quality of his writing. So the value of Eggers’s writing is not merely to be found in its concern with social and political issues and raising moral and ethical questions, but at the same time, Eggers stresses the aestheticization of his writing, what can be understood as the artistic activity to embellish the narrative with imagined sensory details to provide some feeling of lifelikeness. This novel thus also invests in what Werner Wolf calls the “aesthetic illusion”, the effect that the reader experiences a fictional text, or parts of it, ‘as if it were a slice of life’. So “making the book come alive” implies that the author has the freedom to appeal to some characteristics of fictional writing, such as the invention of dialogue, detailed descriptions of the fictional world, and the representation of the interiority of characters, in order to make the book more compelling and affective.

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55 Sharrock 2009.
56 Hakemulder 2000, p. 150. Or see other empirical studies to the persuasiveness of literature: Strange and Leung 1999 or Green and Brock 2000.
57 Kirschling 2007.
When we take a look at the novel at a more concrete level, we see the narrative is written in the perspective of the first person – in terms of narratology there is a homodiegetic narrator – whereby the I-narrator Deng is at the same time the protagonist of the novel. Via this technique What offers a meticulous structure of feeling of the character given that first person narration provides an insight into the interiority of the fictional character. As is argued, this technique may feel more sincere or authentic, because the reader is in the position to know the character from the inside and thus has direct access to the thoughts, feelings, and the other phenomena of his or her mind. In such a way, What offers a poignant insight into the emotions and feelings of an African refugee, someone who has been through situations of which the vast majority of the Western audience has limited knowledge acquired through media images. This way, the reader comes to know how the I-narrator felt in numerous of devastating situations. For example, in the beginning of the novel the I-narrator gives a description of his feelings about his life in America after he is robbed and physically abused: ‘I am tired of this country. I am thankful for it, yes, (...) but I am tired of the promises. I came here (...) contemplating and expecting quiet. (...) But for most of us, the slowness of our transition (...) has wrought chaos’. Gradually the narrative switches back and forth between the past where, for example, we read how the I-narrator experienced the flight from his hometown whereby many of the refugees started to pass away during the walk through the desert: ‘Death took boys every day, and in a familiar way: quickly and decisively, without much warning or fanfare. These boys were faces to me, boys I had sat next to for a meal, or who I had seen fishing in a river. (...) We could not mourn about the dead. There was no time’. Or in another passage, the I-narrator informs how the life in a refugee camp is: ‘What was life in Kakuma? Was it life? There was debate about this. On the one hand, we were alive, which meant that we were living a life, that we were eating and could enjoy friendships and learning and could love. But we were nowhere. Kakuma was nowhere’.

What these quotations in my reading demonstrate is that What provides a full-blown presentation of the protagonist’s mind, so that, in Alan Palmer’s term, we can say the protagonist is presented as a ‘whole mind’. Just like real human beings fictional persons can consist in mental phenomena such as feelings, thoughts, (short- and long-term) intentions,
plans, goals, set of beliefs, desires, motives and reasons for action.\textsuperscript{63} The more of these features the character carries within him- or herself, the more ‘human’ the character may feel. \textit{What} is occupied with the construction of such a ‘real’ human mind as the novel is especially concerned with the conveying of “experientiality”, which is, as it is defined by Monika Fludernik, ‘the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience’.\textsuperscript{64} From the memories of the protagonist’s life in his hometown in Sudan, to the flight and the life in refugee camps and finally in America, \textit{What} demonstrates the meaning and experience of life under the circumstances of the African civil war.

**Therapy**
What seems relevant in this novel is that the \textit{sharing of experience} and therewith language is explicitly used as a meaning-making instrument since it possesses the capacity to give possible answers to the question ‘what it is like to be a human’ in the context of contemporary society in Africa as well an immigrant life in the US. Not only does the author himself demonstrate a faith in the far-reaching possibilities of fiction, but (as the narrator of \textit{What} repeatedly emphasizes) the act of storytelling is the vehicle for him to make sense of his world. Therefore he keeps stressing the importance of sharing his feelings with others, something that reinforces the sincere and reliable impression he makes. We read for instance: ‘The stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing, and I want everyone to hear them. (…) and it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world’.\textsuperscript{65} Also at the end of the novel the narrator is highlighting an urgency for being engaged with others through the telling of stories: ‘I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with words’.\textsuperscript{66} This quotation suggests that the narrator has the desire to fill the distance between people with the telling of his life-story so that others could identify and empathize with his life. The way in which the narrator uses the words gives away his desire to intervene in collective ideas about the world in order to make the world more livable. The narrator concludes: ‘I have spoken to every person I have encountered these last difficult days (…)\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{63} Palmer 2002, p. 38. Besides, it has been argued, for instance by Nicoline Timmer (2010), that theorists in the field of narratology have increased their interest in the construction of real human beings in fiction. One can think here for example of the work of Alan Palmer’s \textit{The Construction of Fictional Minds} (2002), Ralf Schneider’s \textit{Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character} (2001), or Monika Fludernik’s \textit{Towards a ‘Natural’ Narratology} (1996).
\textsuperscript{64} Fludernik 1996, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{65} Eggers 2006, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, p. 475.
because to do anything else would be something less than human’. In the narrator’s words resonates a request for closeness, humanity, and empathy between human beings; at the same time the narrator pronounces here the desire that the telling of his life story is meant to cause change among the participants of the community and so could make the world a better place: if we understand each other’s situation we could interact more respectfully. At stake is that fictional storytelling is presented as an act which can have an impact on reality. What invites the reader to empathize and sympathize with the faith of the protagonist and other African refugees and asks the reader to take a stand towards this social issue. In this sense it can be argued this novel has a “therapeutic” dimension. According to Timothy Aubry, therapeutic fiction elicits an emotional and empathic reaction among readers, it is able to bridge cultural differences and, as Aubry puts it, “promote[s] forms of recognition, identification, and sympathy among strangers living without the support of stable local communities”. Even though I am not interested in the question if this novel has actual such an impact on readers because I focus on how authors frame their own works, it can be said this kind of “therapeutics” is what What attempts to brings about. It introduces the reader into an unfamiliar world whose experiential qualities allow him or her to imagine what it is like to be a Sudanese or African refugee, so that it through the narrative is possible for a reader to grasp, to use David Herman’s phrase, “what it is like” to be someone or something.

**Subjective truth**

What we have seen thus far is that What blurs the limits between fiction and reality to ensure the liveliness and humanness of the fictional world. By reworking facts and real human experience with the tools of the fiction writer the novel attempts to intervene in reality, and particularly to affect readers’ worldview. By weaving ‘world-constructing’ elements into the narrative, it seems that the novel claims “validity” in the real world in the sense that we might assign a truth-conditional status to the text that is similar to other world-constructing texts, especially journalism. In connection to the journalistic report that Eggers initially wrote about his trip to Sudan we may establish whether this is true or false, but as is indicated in the paratext, as a whole What is a novel and that means that we do not need to ask whether the events in the novel existed extra-textually. This, however, does not mean that the novel cannot claim validity about reality or detract from the relevance of our understanding it. I would

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69 Herman 2009, p. 143
argue that What is not about the search of objective truth, but rather about subjective or experiential truth: in this respect, literary engagement becomes uncoupled from journalism. To restate my main point here, the narrative technique of first person narration plays a crucial role in my reading: it uncovers aspects of the human condition from the inside in order to grant the reader access to the subjective feelings of the character.

As a consequence of What’s focus on the subjectivity of Deng as a possible human being, the novel might have a considerable impact on the reader’s worldview. As Eggers once explained it, the effect of this approach is that it is ‘a lot more difficult to accept the casualties that we read about randomly on page 13 of the newspaper, because suddenly we know who these people are’. With other words, this novel is an effort to negotiate the standards with which the plight in Africa is generally represented in world-constructing texts such as newspapers. The novel is framed as opening up a new way of seeing certain human beings and the other, non-Western side of the world.

By trying to make the reader aware of that other side of the world the novel evidently takes up the tasks of littérature engagée. In a Sartrian perspective, language is used as an instrument to interfere in the debate about this topic and it tries to make the reader aware of the state of affairs with respect to the position of African refugees. As I have shown through paratextual analysis, Eggers feels a certain responsibility for fate of the refugees in his country, there is a personal investment from the side of the author and as is stressed in the afterword, all benefits of the novel will directly go to the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation for the building of facilities in the hometown of Valentino Achak Deng, so that it is actually possible for readers to act for or become involved with the problems outlined in the novel.

Conclusion
Several things have come to light in this first case study. In the first place we have seen that Dave Eggers is playing the “language game” seriously and sincerely, based on an investment in the community. From an underlying Wittgensteinian concept of language, Eggers’s starting point is the social structure in which he is embedded; he is committing himself with the participants of the community and by playing a language game with them, he is searching for the way these groups of individuals make sense of the world. As we have seen journalistic tools are helpful to Eggers in this language game: “immersion strategies”, “interviews”, “documentation”, and “investigation”. What subsequently happens is that the author moves

70 Kirschling 2007.
from a journalistic stance towards a fiction writer. By means of his narrative the writer desires to have an impact on the worldview of readers; for Eggers, fiction is a better textual form to achieve this than non-fiction, since Eggers argues that fiction is able to shape a narrative in a more compelling way, to make a book come alive: through fiction you ‘hear the person’s voice’ and ‘you get them as individuals’. This conscious step towards fiction thus implies a reevaluation of the capacity and possible effects of the novel as a genre in the social sphere, since fiction is for Eggers a language type with which we could give meaning to the world, a privilege normally reserved for, to use Doležel’s term, ‘world-constructing texts’ like journalism or history. As regards journalism, we saw that Eggers criticizes journalistic discourse and his novel is an attempt to negotiate the representation of the Sudanese Lost Boys which were shaped by journalism.

With regard to the novel, we have seen that Eggers builds on several non-fictional elements – such as the existence of the I-narrator/protagonist in the real world and historical facts, persons, and events – all of which have an extra-textual existence, which may elicit a strong believing response on the reader’s side. For the most part, however, the text is constructed with fictional elements which are deployed to contribute to the make-believe of the text; paradoxically, then, one has to use fictional techniques to make the text more realistic-looking. Through the narrative device of the homodiegetic narrator, the reader is introduced into the subjective experiences (or subjective truth) of the main character, so that the reader can experience what it is like to be a Sudanese refugee and is able to empathize and sympathize with the faith of the protagonist. Consequently, I have argued that What Is the What can have a “therapeutic” function: the novel tries to bridge cultural differences by promoting identification and sympathy. But as Eggers frames his novel, it might even go further than that. The author demonstrates a deep personal responsibility for the social and political issue which he addresses in the novel. He believes that fiction can play a role in the public debate, and he invests in the novel with almost idealistic determination: at stake is Eggers’s desire to make the world a better place.
Chapter 3

Showing one half of humanity how the other half lives

François Bon and Daewoo

Introduction

When the French author François Bon visited Amsterdam in the late 1990s, he remarked to a journalist of the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad: ‘Our society is sick, the world is doing violence to us. I cannot help but struggle with these images’.\(^{71}\) This argument seems to apply to Bon’s prolific authorship in general but certainly to his book Daewoo (2004) in particular. Bon is often described by literary critics as the contemporary Balzac or Zola, a comparison resulting from his writing about the industrial and post-industrial working-class in France. In line with his French predecessors, Bon’s books are about the struggles of the less fortunate in society: the homeless, the young criminals, the unemployed, the factory workers and drug addicts. Until 1990, Bon was widely known as a novelist, but for a period between 1994 and 2004 he decided to distance himself from the novel as a genre. In Impatience (1998) Bon expresses his discontent about the status of fiction and the novel: ‘Le roman ne suffit plus, ni la fiction, les histoires sont là dans la ville’ [The novel is no longer enough, neither is fiction, the stories are there in the city].\(^{72}\) This statement appears to be a call for realism; therefore Bon shifted the emphasis in his work to other (especially non-fictional) genres, like theater (Quatre avec le mort), the autobiography (Mécanique), biography (Rolling Stones, une biographie 2001) or essays on Hopper and Koltès.

Surprisingly enough, in 2004 Bon switched back to the novel when Daewoo (in Dutch with the subtitle ‘the disposable factory’) appeared. Even more striking is that, at first sight, this novel seems to have little to do with fiction. Bon stays so close to reality that the reader, as Dutch critic Ger Leppers notes, sometimes may wonder whether the book can be called a novel at all.\(^{73}\) The book, named after the Korean electronics corporation (which means ‘vast universe’), is an investigation into what happened when the Daewoo group opened three factories in Lorraine, the North of France, in the late 1980s with the aid of French

\(^{71}\) Dijkgraaf 2000 (my translation).


\(^{73}\) Leppers 2007.
governmental subsidies which aimed at boosting the area’s employment. When the company started to suffer huge losses in the early 2000s, the three plants were suddenly closed. The machines were packed and shipped to Turkey, while leaving about 1200 people behind, jobless and with few prospects of future employment. The report Bon subsequently wrote, appears to be a trustworthy account of the aftermath of the events as it affected the factory workers, which were mainly women. As we shall see later Bon’s report obvious bears characteristics of a journalistic style. Yet, the author explicitly frames the book as a novel, as it is repeatedly stressed on the blurb of the book as well by the narrator on the very first page: ‘Pourquoi appeler roman un livre quand on voudrait qu’il émane de cette presence si étonnante parfois de toutes choses […]?’ 74 What seems at stake here, just like in the case of Eggers’s novel, is that this novel seems to be an example of literary engagement whereby the fiction writer works in an engaged, journalistic mode but eventually returns to fiction. This is an interesting case, especially in light of Bon’s previously quoted statements that fiction and the novel are ‘not enough’. What makes the author in this case opt for the genre of the novel again?

François Bon and the realist tradition

Given the fact that Bon is frequently compared to the French realist school, it may come as no surprise that his view on the function of literature is in line with the traditional conceptions of the realist school. Bon explains in an interview with him that the task of literature is to articulate and disclose the less well-known, and often hidden, aspects of social reality. 75 So Bon endorses the realist conception that literature should render the reality of the layers of social structure. In an interview just after the publication of Daewoo, Bon states that he considers it as his task to reflect about the world, or to use the words of the interviewer: ‘C’est son boulot – il [François Bon] dit « notre travail », parle des écrivains comme d’un corps de métier, de la littérature comme une chance de s’interroger sur le monde, de s’interroger sur soi’. 76 Elsewhere, Bon implies that writing has a sort of universal function that hasn’t changed much in the course of history: ‘Je crois que la fonction de l’écriture reste inchangée, et qu’elle

74 Bon 2004, p. 9. ‘Why call a book novel when we’d like it to emanate from the presence, so surprising sometimes, of all the things […]?’ (This translation I borrowed from the article of DiLorio (2006), the rest of the translations are mine.
75 Van den Boogaard 1996.
76 Laval 2004 (my emphasis). ‘That’s his job – he [François Bon] said, our work as writers is with literature to offer the opportunity to ask questions to the world, to question ourselves.’
a à faire avec le sens, avec l’interrogation, ou ce qu’Aristote énonçait: « Qu’est-ce qui pousse les hommes à se représenter eux-mêmes? » Nous déchiffrons le réel avec les livres qui nous ont formé autant l’imaginaire que le regard’. 77 What we see in these two quotations is that the author considers it his task to reflect on reality by asking oneself questions about it ( littérature comme une chance de s’interroger sur le monde). In other words, Bon aligns himself with the realist tradition according to which literature is a reflection of reality; or, as it is often summarized through Stendhal’s words, the novel is a mirror carried along a high road: ‘Un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route’. 78 Bon also stresses the cognitive aspect of literature by assuming that writing is a world-constructing activity since he believes we decipher reality through novels (Nous déchiffrons le réel avec les livres). This view has been highlighted by Bon in an interview in which he was asked if Daewoo is an attempt to capture the contemporary social reality. Bon gives the following answer: ‘C’est bien cela qui est terrible: le « réel » ne produit pas de lui-même ses représentations. Dans un monde où tout du langage est soumis à la prolifération des mots, informations et images mélangées, les figures plus nus sont occultées. Alors que le mot même de « réel » est déjà l’espace des représentations’. 79 Bon implies here that reality does not produce its own representations (le réel ne produit pas de lui-même ses représentations); on the contrary, the picture we have of reality is reliant on and subjected to language and the proliferation of words with which we shape reality. Put differently, Bon suggests that humans construct reality and give meaning to the world by means of linguistic practices. What is interesting in my view is that, although the author’s ideas on the relation between text and world springs from a traditional realist conception, they are not devoid of a postmodern undertone. On the one hand Bon considers it his task to reflect and question contemporary reality (which is only possible when language stands in a direct and immediate relation with the world), while on the other Bon is aware of the constructedness and impenetrability of language to capture reality. However, as I shall emphasize later in this discussion Bon does not play with language in a postmodern way in Daewoo, but instead he seeks the right representations, i.e. the right words or ‘le mot juste’ to put it in the words of the narrator, in order to find a form which can do justice to the reality and the lives of the factory workers explored by Daewoo.

77 Lebrun 2004 (my emphasis). ‘I think the function of writing has not changed over time, it has to do with making meaning, with raising questions, like Aristotle said: “What drives men to represent themselves?” We decipher the reality by means of the the books which have shaped the imagination with which we look.’

78 See Stendhal’s Le Rouge et le Noir. ‘A novel is a mirror carried along a high road.’

79 Lebrun 2004 (my emphasis). ‘This is indeed what is terrible: the “reality” does not produce his own representations. In a world where every language is subject to the proliferation of words, information and images, most naked facts disappear. While the word “real” is already a result of the representation of space.’
The true and the real

Before discussing the novel in some detail, it would be fruitful to shed light on the coming into being of the book. The novel was written together with a play about the closing of the three factories, a play that Bon devised together with Charles Tordjman, director of the National Drama Centre of Nancy. Bon was asked to investigate the social drama unfolding in North-East France, but as soon as the author started the project, it turned out that the impact of the shutting down of the factories on society and the complexity of the issue (from social and political perspectives) was bigger than Bon expected. The investigation took months because – as we can see on Bon’s website, where all his material is documented – it consisted in an extensive engaging with the local community. Bon interviewed numerous witnesses (or one might even say ‘victims’), took photographs, visited locations varying from urban areas to intimate spaces such as the apartments of the factory workers, and consulted police reports, press reports and other documents on the social and economic situation of the North-East of France. Daewoo is thus grown out of a meticulous journalistic investigation that strongly depends on communication with a local community in which the author immerses himself for a certain period of time. Similar to Dave Eggers, Bon is doing an extensive personal investment by immersing himself into a group of individuals and he is trying to identify how real people deal with their social reality.

Bon gradually realized during his investigation that a play (and thus the genre of theater) would not be best way to call attention to the fate of the dismissed factory workers. In an interview Bon says it was for him unacceptable that the factory workers devoted their lives to the factory for almost twenty years and when the factory shut down, the workers were left in social misery while there remained no single trace of their efforts: ‘Tout cela traverse le langage de tous les jours, la relation aux autres que nous déployons par le langage. Le travail de l’écrivain, c’est de mettre ces questions en travail, de leur donner leur concrétude, par images, mots, mémoire’. What becomes apparent here is that the author feels a certain responsibility for the fate of the factory workers and he uses authority as a writer to give concreteness to their words (mots) and memories (mémoire). Therefore Bon decided that he would write a novel in addition to the play. In an interview he explicitly emphasized that his work must be read as a novel:

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80 See www.tierslivre.net
81 Tézenas du Montcel 2004. ‘We use language all day long, the relation with others depends on language. The job of the writer is to deal with these issues at work, to give them concreteness in images, words and memory.’
J’ai mis « roman » par provocation. Pour ne pas être classé dans la case documentaire, voire sociologie. (...) J’ai peint une fresque. Cela suppose de reconstruire, de partir de son propre matériau pour rejoindre ce qu’on sait être vrai, mais que le réel occulte, efface. L’écriture convoque tous les procédés de la fiction, l’illusion des lieux et qu’on s’y déplace, la proximité des visages, le grain ou le rythme des voix: le plaisir, c’est d’amener l’écriture là où le réel est énigme, où la raison ne peut aider à comprendre.82

A few aspects are important here. Firstly, the author puts the label ‘novel’ on the book to prevent being categorized as non-fiction (documentary or sociology). Further, Bon draws a contrast between the true (vrai) and the real (réel). It seems, at least in my reading, that Bon is inclined to adapt the ‘real’, non-fictional material (i.e. the verifiable facts of world-constructing texts) and shape them in such a way that they may give a ‘true’ impression and therefore come alive in the minds of the audience. Bon, with other words, seems to foreground the aesthetic quality of his writing, which means the writer is allowed to use procedures traditionally associated with fiction (les procédés de la fiction) in order to adapt the facts in such a way they elicit a stronger affective reader response. The procedures alluded to by Bon in the above quotation enable him to shape the narrative with sensory details that may look more realistic and create an “aesthetic illusion”83 – as Bon puts it, this aesthetic illusion has to do with things like the closeness of faces (la proximité des visages) or the rhythm of the characters’ voices (le rythme des voix). To Bon in the case of Daewoo, and at this point he is similar to Eggers, writing fiction is more liberating and compelling because the abilities of the fiction writer afford him the freedom to rework the real material in order to evoke a convincing reality that may feel more affective than non-fiction.

Plurality of voices
Let me now turn to the novel more specifically. Even though the book is explicitly presented to us as a novel, the first impression is that the book seems to be a mixture of non-fiction and a play. The book is composed of 49 short chapters divided in several plot-lines. In the first

82 Bourmeau 2004. ‘I called my book “novel” by provocation. In order not to be classified as a documentary or sociology. (...) I painted a fresco. This suggests to reconstruct with my own material what could have been true, but what really happened, is gone. Writing offers procedures of fiction with which you could render the illusion of places, the proximity of faces, grain or the rhythm of voices. The pleasure of writing is that is helps to understand the mystery.’

83 As explained in chapter 2, this “aesthetic illusion” is according to Werner Wolf the effect of fiction that the reader experiences the fictional texts, or parts of it, ‘as if it were a slice of life’. Wolf 2004, p. 331.
strand the reader follows the narrator first in his investigation of the area of the closed factories and then in his reflections on the writing process. Striking in this plot-line is that there seems to be no distinction between the narrator and the author because both have the same name. As Sam DiLorio observes, ‘the absence of a clear boundary encourages an autobiographical reading of the text and reinforces its ties to the real world’. The second plot-line offers us a series of interviews with dismissed Daewoo employees, almost all of them women, who tell about their former work, their contemporary daily lives, and the impact the closing of the factory has had on their lives. In these conversations with the ex-workers two main events return repeatedly. The first story the characters speak about is about their deceased colleague Sylvia F., one of the former employees who could not cope with the situation and committed suicide. The second event often discussed is the mysterious burning of one of the closed factories. This second plot-line of the monologues of the woman gives a human face to the social crisis, because it offers portraits of real human beings by which the reader gets an impression of what it is like and how it feels to be a ‘victim’ of the Daewoo situation. We read for instance a part of such a portrait in the following passage in which one of the former Daewoo employer is explaining her feelings about her struggling with the fears of the factory’s fire:

Le feu, alors, tu le portes pour longtemps dans la tête. Le bruit que cela fait, avec des boums et des cracs. Dedans, ils ont dit que les bouteilles de gaz explosaient, et les citermes de produits. Alors, pendant des nuits, dans le noir de ta chambre, tu vois encore ces flammes bleues, ou vertes, ou rouges: une usine ne flambe pas avec des flammes jaunes, des flamme normales.

The third thread then consists in passages of the play written by Bon and performed in Avignon in July 2004. The fragments of the play, a conversation of four women about their lives and former work, is an adaptation of the words of the women interviewed by Bon. These sections are overtly fictional since they consist in a summary of the events which are described in the rest of the novel. Finally, just like Eggers’s story, there is another plot-line that runs through the novel and hinges on the non-fictional macro-history of the closing of the factories, composed of dry facts like unemployment rates of the region, information about

84 DiLorio 2006, p. 7.
85 Bon 2004, p. ‘The fire, well, you don’t get it out of your mind. The noise it makes, with banging’s and cracking. They said inside the gas cylinders and the tanks with chemical materials were exploding. So during the nights in the dark of your bedroom the blue, or green, or red flames show up in front of you. If a factory is on fire you don’t see yellow flames, normal flames.’
politicians, the analysis of the involved investments, dates of the events, and so forth. As these four components of the narrative may illustrate, *Daewoo* is a fragmented narrative. The order in which the events are presented (*syuzhet* in terms of narrative theory) does not correspond to the order in which they actually happened (*fabula*). There is a big difference between *syuzhet* and *fabula* because the events are not presented chronologically. Besides, a multiplicity of voices are staged, making the narrative polyphonic. We hear not only the narrator speaking, but also the voices of the former factory workers and the conversations of the characters in the play.

Due to the fragmentation generated by these different discourses and the dissimilarity in tone and style, the novel accumulates a plurality of voices, perspectives and emotions. Yet the fragmented structure and the alternation in tones seems rather an attempt to render the real situation as it was. As the narrator says, the real world consist in a diffraction of language and it is therefore legitimate to juxtapose different linguistic discourses and voices in the novel:

Les déclarations, les reportages, les rapports. Les chiffres et les commentaires. Les mots à voix posée et propres des puissants […]

The effect of the juxtaposition of different discourse genres is that the novel bears a strong element, to refer to Doležel’s distinction again, of non-fictional, world-constructing texts since it draws on a great deal of factual information – which in turn elicits a believing reader response. However, in the eyes of the narrator, many of these texts (such as the social and economic facts, press reports, and the like) obscure the ‘true’ reality, that is to say, the experienced reality of the men and women who worked in the factory, who are ignored by the facts. The narrator overtly complains about the journalistic reporting: ‘Il suffisait d’arrêter le voiture et de marcher cent mètres à pied, soudain ce qu’on a reçu par les images et let mots de journaux but dans la réalité immédiate, où nous n’avons plus mots ni d’images ni plus rien de certain’. Or in another fragment we hear one of the characters says: ‘On a beau mettre la radio, la télévision, on n’a que les nouvelles qu’ils se récipient les uns les autres, en tout cas

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86 Bon 2004, p. 11. ‘The fractures run over the surface and desintegrate the world. These diffractions occured to me in all these weeks, in language, faces and signs. Statements and reports. The figures and the commentaries. Words which are softly and powerful spoken.’

87 Bon 2004, p. 12-13. ‘It was enough to stop the car and walk a hundred yards, you got the images and the articles in the newspaper, but in the immediate reality there was not a single word or a picture of anything like that.’
rien qui nous concerne, rien qui soit ce qu’on a là sous les yeux, qui permette qu’on sache qui on est et ce qu’ici on fait’. 88 In these two fragments, the novel critiques the flawed representation of the factory works given by the media, who, as producers of world-constructing texts, offer certain standards or models of representation for this group of individuals. Bon’s narrator and the characters dismiss these standards of representation as false and inadequate.

Therefore the author, as it is also described by the narrator, sets himself the task to seek for the human experience which is lurking behind the complexity of the tragedy in order to do justice to the lives of the factory workers. Also in this case, there is definitely a kind of truth quest at stake. Similarly to Eggers’s endeavor, we may call this the search for subjective and experiential truth, rather than an objective truth. For instance, this desire is expressed in the following words of the narrator: ‘C’est moi qui avais voulu qu’on parle de la peur qui s’installe, de la peur ordinaire, quand derrière l’avalanche des chiffres il y a cette simple perpétuation du quotidien, du visage qu’on offre aux autres dans les ville, de qui on est pour ses enfants et ce qu’on leur propose’. 89 Noteworthy in this quotation is that the narrator focuses on the discovery of the human side of the social drama by engaging with the ex-workers’ practice of everyday life and their subjective experiences and emotionality. The narrator attempts, to refer here to Bon’s quote at the beginning of this chapter, to detect how the world violates the lives of the factory workers: he is mainly interested in human aspects of the issue and its impact on ordinary human lives behind the ‘avalanche of facts’.

Unlike Eggers’s novel, however, Daewoo does not focus on Fludernik’s ‘experientiality’ of a single character. As I have argued, What presents its main character as a ‘whole mind’ consisting in a complex of feelings, thoughts, intentions, plans, goals, set of beliefs, and so on. The factory workers in Daewoo are presented in a less ‘complete’ way since each character is not elaborated in detail. Instead, due to the polyphony of the narrative we hear several voices in the interviews where each character brings in his or her subjective experiences as a piece of a larger whole. Whereas What mainly concentrates on one character who should be taken as representative of a larger group of individual, Daewoo stages a number of subjective perspectives and experiences which taken together attain a certain coherence.

88 Ibid., p. 188. ‘If you switch on the radio or the television, they only bring the news they copied from each other, in any case, nothing about us, whatsoever nothing about what we are going through at the moment, nothing what reminds you of who you are and what you do.’
89 Ibid., p. 42. ‘It had been my wish to talk about the fear of ordinary life when daily life just goes on behind the avalanche of facts, about the face you will show to the others in the city, about who you are for your children and what you could offer them’.
Truthfulness and reliability

We have seen thus far that Bon’s attitude towards the world with regard to his novel Daewoo consists in a profound investment in the community by making use of documentary research, interviews and fieldwork. What I would like to do now is to take a closer look at how this engagement finds its way into the novel. As I explained above, one of the main strands of the novel follows the narrator’s investigations and reflections on the writing process. The line between the fictive and the real is in this part very thin, since there seems to be almost no distinction between author and narrator. But more strikingly, at least in my reading, what influences this almost non-fictional credibility of the narrative is the attitude of the narrator. The picture drawn of the narrator is equivalent to the investigator and journalist and the narrator’s tone encourages a strong believing response which is similar to non-fiction. The narrator says for example that there has been done too little investigation, so that a lot of the reality has vanished: ‘Effacement: parce que ce qui transperce l’actualité, séparant ou brisant ce qui était établi de façon stable entre les hommes et les choses, a disparu sans suffisant examen préalable des conséquences’.90 As a consequence, the narrator considers it as his task to do the investigation, so that at a certain point other characters in the narrative even assume that Bon actually is a journalist: ‘On me saluait, supposant ma présence ici liée à une justification locale: journaliste à mon tour, peut-être d’un des quotidiens régionaux vu mon ordinateur, mes cheveux et mes lunettes’.91 This journalistic identity of the narrator is reinforced when the narrator draws attention to his recording equipment whereby every interview is recorded, suggesting that the interviews of the woman are literally transcribed from the tape: ‘Je retranscris plein texte, sans raccourcis’92 and ‘Géraldine Roux, transcription brute (selon sa propre injonction)’.93 When one of the interviewees asks the narrator if she may read his notes, we read the narrator’s comments:

90 Bon 2004, p. 13. ‘Nothing left: because what pops up in the news, what destroys or disconnects the things which people connect with one another, has disappeared without sufficient prior inquiry as to the consequences.’
91 Ibid., p. 38. ‘Everyone told me goodbye, assuming that my presence was related to a local level: a journalist, maybe one of the regional newspapers given my computer, my hair and glasses.’
92 Ibid., p. 89. ‘I give the full text, without editing’.
93 Ibid., p 89. ‘Géraldine Roux, unprocessed (on her own explicit request) view of her words.’
J’ai dit ça, je l’ai dit comme ça?’ J’ai répondu que ma raison de noter avec précision c’était aussi pour la nécessité de librement peindre: qu’à ce prix seulement on est juste.

Une construction de mots pour mettre en avant, oui, sa façon de dire les mots.94

What becomes clear in this quotation is that the narrator makes a rhetorical move by emphasizing the truthfulness of his report through which he makes a reliable impression. In this way he stresses his truthfulness and his reliability, what is further underlined by the commitment and responsibility he shows towards the victims of the social misery. The narrator says he feels a ‘responsabilité collective’ [collective responsibility]95 of taking the task to capture the memory of the desolated place, and just like Eggers, Bon’s narrator wants to give voice to the unheard and underappreciated people in order to do justice to the experience of these people: ‘Ce qui me ferait peine, c’est tous ceux dont on ne parle même pas, qui n’ont même pas eu la consolation des journaux’.96 The narrator thus positions himself as an honest, reliable and personally involved authority. This sincerity is further implied when the narrator is referring to sources and citations when he is using the words of documents, for instance when he refers to the report of the fire department, when he cites from a local newspaper or transcribes from interviews.97

Yet, what is different from the attitude of the journalist and characteristic of the engaged writer is that the narrator (and Bon himself) takes a stance on social and political issues and tries to convince the reader of this position, while the attitude of the journalist strives to be objective. The narrator explicitly engages with the position of the factory workers and condemns the filthiness and hypocrisy of the political and economic game played by politicians, the government and the Korean employers. By doing so, the author attempts to become part of the community of the ex-factory workers, or as the narrator says, the boundary between himself and the other must be abolished: ‘Quand on s’aperçoit à nouveau de ma présence, qu’on me demande ce que j’en pense ou ce que j’en crois, c’est que soudain on m’a remis à l’extérieur, qu’une frontière s’est refaite’.98 So this makes clear the relation between the narrator and the characters is based on trust on both sides, since the narrator wants to be

94 Bon 2004, p. 88. ‘“Did I say that, did I say it this way?” I answered I wrote down everything accurately because that was necessary to freely draw a picture; that one could only be truthful by putting it this way. A construction of words to, indeed, bring her words into the limelight.’
95 Ibid., p. 67.
96 Ibid., p. 63. ‘All these people of whom one would not even talk, that would distress me, these people who don’t even have the consolation of being named in the newspapers.’
97 Ibid., respectively p. 137, 791 120, 171-72.
98 Ibid., p. 88. ‘When someone becomes aware of my presence, when they ask about my thoughts or opinion, then this means I’m replaced again outside their world, that there is a boundary raised.’
absorbed into the persons he is investigating by surpassing the ‘boundary’ between himself and them, while the other characters accept the presence of the author. The narrator is thus stressing his reliability, and as Liesbeth Korthals Altes argues, the narrator is ‘implying his trustworthiness’. In my reading this could also be interpreted as an attempt of the narrator to gain the trust of the reader coming to believe that, for example, transcripts of the interviews are real. Yet it depends on the reader’s stance towards the text if he trusts the narrator and completely believes that the presented report really took place that way.

**Aestheticizing the real**

The narrator is thus presented as ‘the one who tells the truth’ and through several rhetoric strategies he ‘underscores his integrity’. It is this reliable attitude in combination with the non-fictional elements of the plot that may encourage a reading which is similar to non-fiction, but throughout the narrative the narrator is also reflecting on the writing-process – a strategy that foregrounds the aesthetic and poetic potential of the narrative and undermines the non-fictional reading. According to the narrator, the interwoven fragmented plot-lines of the novel do not simply mirror or render reality, but they uncover a deeper truth; or, as the narrator puts it, his report is a ‘mystery’ to be unraveled: ‘Pourtant, c’est cela qu’il y avait ici aussi à extorquer: ce mystère qui soude un lieu à l’énigme des hommes se passe parfois de traces’. The narrator then sees in the novel an appropriate genre through which he finds a form where he is able to bring together a (re)construction of the forgotten traces of the closed factory and what it did to its former employers. When the investigation was done, the narrator considers it his duty to reconstruct the words he collected in the interviews, but as he says, ‘Je ne prétends pas rapporter les mots tels qu’ils m’ont été dits’.

For that, the narrator states that the only way of reconstructing the collected words is by turning them into fiction, a novel: ‘J’appelle ce livre roman d’en tenter la restitution par l’écriture, en essayant que les mots redisent aussi ces silences, les yeux qui vous regardent ou se détournent, le bruit de la ville tel qu’il vous parvient par la fenêtre’.

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100 DiFiorio 2006, p. 12.
101 Bon 2004, p. 102. ‘This also had to be extracted of this place: the mystery which forges a link between a specific site and the riddle of the people, which is untraceable at some time.’
102 Ibid, p. 42. ‘I do not pretend to render the words as they were said to me.’
103 Ibid, p. 42. ‘I call this book a novel because I attempt to revive all that the told stories by the factory workers by means of what I write, through which I also try to retell the silences, the eyes watching you or turning away, the sound of the city as it reaches you through the window.’
memories, stories, and existence of the factory workers. The narrator is thus aestheticizing the real by making the words more realistic and emotionally charged, as the narrator says by retelling ‘the silences’, ‘eyes watching you or turn away’, or ‘the sound of the city’. So ‘aestheticizing’ here means that Bon supplements the real material with sensory descriptions which provide the story with what Roland Barthes would call ‘reality effects’. In the reflection on the writing-process, the narrator thus indicates the need for an aesthetic or even poetic quality of his writing. Therefore, the narrator (as well as the author in paratextual statements104) frames his endeavor in terms of painting: ‘ce qu’on souhaiterait extorquer du réel, même ici à Fameck, c’est comme du Jérôme Bosch avec les mots, où il y aurait de la nuit, des éclats de fresque, d’étranges inventions, et le surgissement en gros plan de visages comme palpés’.105 And in a later fragment the comparison with painting and the ‘mystery’ of the untraceable reality is made again:

Mon travail, c’est de rendre compte par l’écriture de rapports et d’événements qui concernent les hommes entre eux. L’énigme, c’était Daewoo vide, mais à chercher ainsi ce qui porte trace et fait mémoire, il semble que chaque manifestation de la ville participe de la fresque et la complète, s’y de façon aussi serrée et nécessaire que dans un puzzle.106

What is at stake in these two passages is the idea that fictional mediation, that is to say, adapting the report through fictional procedures, can do justice to the real material gained during the investigation. Bon’s narrator goes as far as to say that the reality of literature rendered through fictional mediation might even feel more realistic than the reality itself: ‘comme si le réel qu’il évoque [dans le livre] n’en était de fait qu’un prolongement’.107 So here Bon attributes to his novel – and to literature in general – the capacity to approach reality itself. Here again Bon stresses that an adapted version of non-fictive material (i.e. a reconstruction with fictional elements) is able to make reality tangible.

As a consequence, in my interpretation Bon’s emphasis on his artistic intervention in the non-fictional material makes less likely a non-fictional, documentary reading of Daewoo.

104 See for example Lebrun 2004, where Bon says: ‘Je suis peintre, je peins. C’est une fresque. Il y a des zooms, des horizons, il y a des mots chuchotés ou hurlés, et derrière chacun une histoire. C’est la plus vieille fonction de la littérature, peindre.’

105 Bon 2004, p. 84. ‘What one would hope to force out of reality, even here at Fameck, would be like some kind of Hieronymus Bosch with words, where there would be darkness, dashes of fresco, strange inventions, and almost palpable faces looming in close-up.’

106 Ibid., p. 190. ‘My job is write an account of the reports and events which concern the people here. The mystery was the empty Daewoo, but in search of what bears traces and makes memory, it seems as if each of the city’s appearance takes part in the fresco and completes it, fitting in as snugly and as necessarily as in a puzzle.’

107 Ibid., p. 101. ‘as if the actually existing things described [in the novel] are just extensions of the descriptions.’
The novel may then contain non-fictional elements, but the end result is fiction. Bon underscores the aesthetic form by presenting the text as a construction and an aesthetization of the actual world, something that is for example already salient in the early pages of the novel when the narrator describes the scene around the deserted factory, in which one may notice the focus on the delicate description of the space: ‘Un rond-point (…), de l’herbe mitée et un parking sous des enseignes déteintes. Au lieu de quoi c’est un arrêt de bus sans personne qu’une silhouette alourdie traînant des sacs de supermarché. Ou cette feuille de journal que le vent vous porte jusqu’aux pieds (…), la peintre intact du grillage, les lettres de ce moment-là un avion de tourisme dans le ciel, un soufflé bref dans les arbres, un reflet mauve que faisait des immeubles à l’arrière-plan une géométrie très pure’.\(^{108}\)

As both the author and the narrator make clear, there is a gap between on the one hand the absence of the reality which Bon tries to capture and on the other side the constructedness of his endeavor – and one could detect here a postmodernist feature since the emphasis falls on the medium of language – I would say Daewoo is an attempt to shape a coherent whole out of a mosaic made up by several fragments and a great variety of language. The narrator admits the complexity and the impenetrability of the situation because of the existence of a multiplicity of discourse (official reports, newspaper articles, the stories of the involved people, and the like), but for the narrator this is no reason to accept this opacity, but rather a motivation to shape a coherent reality that is a construction, but a transparent and permeable construction which can do justice to the experience of the people involved. So we have to observe the desire of making a narrative which stimulates coherency and closeness for the community. As the narrator explains in the following passage, the novel is about composing a coherency and an effort to bring to life ‘les visages et les voix’ [the faces and the voices] which crossed his path during the investigation: ‘Ils appellent le récit parce que le réel de lui-même n’en produit pas les liens’\(^{109}\). It is frequently emphasized in the novel that it aims to bind people by bringing their memories and experiences together. As the narrator often repeats, he is ‘refuser l’effacement’ [refusing the erasure], which means that he is refusing that everything becomes invisible.\(^{110}\) So the author does not play with language in a

\(^{108}\) Bon 2004, p. 10. ‘A traffic roundabout (…), the grass is dry and the signs of an underground parking fade away. Instead, at the bus stop someone without a silhouette is burdened with carrying supermarket bags. A piece of paper taken by the wind reaches your foot (…), the painter kept the fence intact, letters of that time are a passenger plane in the sky, a brief breeze in the tree tops, a purple reflection of a building which would give pure geometry.’

\(^{109}\) Ibid., p. 13. ‘They are the driving force behind the report because reality itself shows no correlation.’

\(^{110}\) Ibid., p. 83; 89; 144-45.
postmodernist sense, but instead he cherishes a faith in the power of language to question and make statements about reality, convey values and bind people together because, to adopt the words of one of the characters in the play, language is a ‘façon d’être ensemble’ [way of being together]. Thus, in the case of Daewoo, the novel as a genre acts as a piece of engaged literature, fulfilling the social-cultural function of a testimony and an evocation in order to show, according to the epigraph from François Rabelais, one half of humanity how the other half lives.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, what we have seen is that the “language game” played by François Bon in the case of his novel Daewoo is quite similar to Eggers’s. In the first place the point of departure for the author is the social structure and community of which he is a part: he is explicitly taking a stance on ethical, social, and political issues from the perspectives of the ‘victims’. The author feels an ethical responsibility for the fate of the factory workers and appeals to his authority to speak for those who do not have the capacity or opportunity. Just like Eggers, Bon serves as an intermediary in service of the community: by laying the emphasis on human experience he opens up the possibility to empathize and sympathize with characters which are relatively close to us, especially in times of economic crisis – when many run the risk of losing their jobs. And as a result, Daewoo negotiates the standards of representation in ways that diverge from the familiar stereotypes generated by the journalistic reporting of the issue, which according to the narrator are ‘false and inadequate’.

As we have seen, Bon is adopting the attitude of the journalist and through several tools – “interviewing eye-witnesses”, “spatial exploration”, “documentation” – the author is forging an alliance with the involved people who suffer of Daewoo’s closure. Even if Bon brings together in the novel a great variety of loose fragments, Daewoo attempts to forge a coherent and permeable world-view out of these fragments in order to unveil the deeper truths – the experiential truth of the involved people – of the social injustice of the dismissed factory workers.

With respect to the novel, Bon’s engagement implies also a step to reality by incorporating many non-fictional elements (facts, numbers, dates, and the like), something that is reinforced by the presentation of the narrator, who can be identified with the author himself. Thus, the novel elicits a very strong “believing reader response” by emphasizing the

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truthfulness and authenticity of the narrator and of his investigation, which invites for trust from the reader’s part. However, the novel at the same time stresses the aesthetic dimension of the text. In concrete terms, this means that the author affords himself the artistic liberty of the fiction writer to freely paint with words and construct them in a way that enriches the affectivity and persuasiveness of the evoked world. It is once again worth stressing this paradox: on the one hand the narrator is underscoring his trustworthiness, but on the other hand he is ‘enchanting’ the reader with the “aesthetic illusion” and “reality effects” in order to present a compelling and convincing reality. Yet this is for Bon, but also for Eggers (as shown in the previous chapter), the reason for turning to the genre of the novel: it allows the writer to shape the narrative in such a way that a more realistic-looking world can be evoked in order to convince the reader of the reality in which the author has immersed himself.
Chapter 4
How people do it, live
Arnon Grunberg and Onze oom

Introduction
‘I think that every writer should occasionally bathe him- or herself in so-called reality. It seems a fairytale to me that imagination doesn’t need to be nourished,’ says the Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg in an interview. These words reveal much of the author’s development over the last years. Grunberg (who lives and works in New York) has been increasingly concerned with so-called reality by showing a communal involvement with contemporary social and political issues. Grunberg may be described as one of the leading authors in Dutch contemporary literature, while his work could be considered as characteristic of contemporary literature’s tendency towards a re-engagement with everyday life. What makes Grunberg interesting for my project is precisely this increased interest in reality. Where Grunberg’s early novels, like Blauwe Maandagen (Blue Mondays) and the books published under his heteronym Marek van der Jagt, like De geschiedenis van mijn kaalheid (The History of My Baldness), have been called postmodern because of their irony and cynicism, in his recent work the author seems to be more ‘serious’ and is getting more and more interested in issues of contemporary (everyday) life. Over the last years, Grunberg publishes not only as a novel writer, but also as a journalist since he started writing literary reportages for several Dutch newspapers. Interestingly, this move to a non-fictional genre seems to have influenced Grunberg’s fiction in the sense that he applies journalistic strategies to his literary work. The author attaches great importance to investigative excursions in the ‘real world’, which are – according to Grunberg’s own description – ‘the novelist’s oxygen mask’.

In this last case study, I will focus on Grunberg’s authorship, especially in relation to his novel Onze oom [Our Uncle] (2008), which he has said he could not have written without his experiences as an embedded journalist – a term which applies to journalists who stay with

112 Harbers 2010, p. 75.
113 See for example Vaessens 2009; Van Dijk & Vaessens 2010; Andeweg 2012.
114 Vaessens 2011, p. 19. As Vaessens argues, Grunberg’s early work has been called postmodern by critics for the reason that Grunberg’s early work was ‘fundamentally ironical’ and ‘free of engagement’.
115 Harbers 2010, p. 76.
armed forces in a war situation – in Iraq and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{116} The question that arises is if and how Grunberg’s non-fiction and his excursion in reality have influenced his novelistic writing. But there are more questions in which I am interested: How can Grunberg’s engagement be described? Why does the author lean towards journalism and what does this leaning imply for his fictional work? Why do Grunberg’s excursions in reality lead him to the novel rather than to a non-fictional genre? What are his strategies and how can his attitude be described? And, more generally, to return to the overarching question of my thesis: how does Grunberg play the language game of fiction? As in my Eggers and Bon case studies, I will first look at the author’s attitude towards reality and literature’s task as they emerge from paratextual statements. Then I will tackle his novelistic work more specifically in order to analyze what his attitude and conceptions mean for his novel \textit{Onze oom}. By doing so I will discuss Grunberg’s case in relation to Eggers’s and Bon’s, because as I go along, we shall encounter some differences vis-à-vis the other two authors and their novels.

\textbf{Grunberg the journalist}

Although Grunberg is in the first place a novelist, he has never restricted himself to the genre of the novel or to the written medium. In the beginning years of his career, he wrote plays, letters and poetry in addition to novels, while he later started writing columns for magazines (\textit{VPRO Gids, Vrij Nederland}); for a while he presented a television program (\textit{RAM}), he has a weekly editorial on the radio (\textit{De Avonden}), and occasionally he writes short stories. For a long time Grunberg reported about his life and travels for the Dutch newspaper \textit{NRC Handelsblad}; today, he authors a daily 150-word ‘footnote’ on the front page of the Dutch newspaper \textit{de Volkskrant}, where he comments on global political and social events. Grunberg’s authorship covers thus a range of fictional and non-fictional genres within various media. Interestingly, in 2005 the author took a new direction by starting to focus on literary journalism, a step about which he says: ‘For about ten years I had written for that newspaper [\textit{NRC Handelsblad}] about my life and my journeys once in two weeks. I felt the need to write about the lives of others, or more precisely: to be among the people. After the famous advice Maksim Gorky gave to Isaac Babel’.\textsuperscript{117} In line with Babel, who became a war correspondent, for several times Grunberg visited the war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan as an embedded

\textsuperscript{116} Cloostermans 2008.
\textsuperscript{117} Grunberg 2009, p. 8. ‘Een kleine tien jaar had ik iedere twee weken voor die krant [\textit{NRC Handelsblad}] over mijn leven en mijn reizen geschreven. Ik had de behoefte over de leven van anderen te schrijven, of beter gezegd: om onder de mensen te gaan. Naar het befaamde advies dat Maksim Gorki aan Isaak Babel gaf.’

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journalist with the Dutch, German, and US army. And there were more journalistic projects. Grunberg joined a Dutch family on their holiday, he visited Guantánamo Bay, he worked as a hotel employee in Germany and recently he visited Greece to report about the financial crisis. All these projects testify of a switch in Grunberg’s approach: he is no longer writing about himself, but about the world, its issues and how people cope with these issues.

Yet it seems that Grunberg’s journalistic undertakings do not stand on their own, but rather are used by Grunberg (qua novel writer) as a strategy, to refer to my opening quotation, to nourish his imagination. As he explains in an interview, he started writing reportages ‘to learn something, to get to know something that I didn’t know before’ and that he wants ‘to know how people do it, live’, but Grunberg explains ‘in the long run these journeys will benefit “Arnon Grunberg the novelist”’. Grunberg’s journalistic projects are thus instructive excursions, but ultimately they are fruitful and functional to the novelist. In the first place Grunberg sees himself as a novel writer, something which ties in with his criticism of the journalistic discourse and what makes his inclination to journalism slightly paradoxical since he criticizes journalism ‘for its commercially driven, superficial culture, focusing only on scandals and hype’ and he argues that ‘mainstream journalism necessarily applies a strict definition of what is news’. Literary journalism may offer the opportunity to distinguish himself from the ‘mainstream journalism’, but Grunberg explicitly emphasizes that the novel is on the top of his hierarchy: ‘I think I value my novels more. But I certainly do not regard my literary reportage as just some work on the side’. Grunberg’s faith in the novel as a genre might be explained with the author’s belief that fiction is a powerful instrument to represent reality, one at least equal to non-fictional discourse. To adopt Frank Harbers’ words, Grunberg ‘points out that dominant contemporary journalistic practice is neither the only nor the naturally privileged way to represent reality’. Again, Grunberg pronounces his preference for fiction above non-fiction because the former can achieve something the latter cannot: ‘I think that a novel, one way or the other, has to search for a “higher truth”. How that truth is related to journalistic truth seems simple to me.

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118 Harbers 2010, p. 83.
119 Ibid., p. 76.
120 Ibid., p. 74.
121 Ibid., p. 76.
122 Ibid., p. 75.
123 Ibid., p. 74.
Journalistic truth revolves around the command: Do not invent'.

For reasons similar to Bon and Eggers, Grunberg opts for fiction: the non-fiction writer is burdened with the restrictions of ‘reality’, which means that he has to give an accurate and truthful representation of the reality, one which can be checked and falsified; by contrast, the fiction writer takes advantage of imagination and invention, valuable tools for Grunberg because they let him achieve this “higher truth”.

**Higher truth and ‘Wahrheits-Erlebnisse’**

This notion of the “higher truth” demands some more explanation because I think it is important for my interpretation of Grunberg’s way of playing the language game. What does he exactly mean with this “higher truth”? Why is it that this “higher truth” can be reached in particular by the novelist? In an interview about *Onze oom*, Grunberg explains that these higher truths have to do with the nature of the human being: ‘I hope that a private, individual truth (about me or my characters) quickly becomes bigger and that it convinces the reader of the validity of my view of the world. Not just to convey a vision, like in an opinion article, but an inescapable truth about who we are.’

It becomes clear now that the truth Grunberg is looking for has less to do with a journalistic truth (objective truths about facts, assertions or opinions) – it is a truth about ‘who we are’ and thus about the human condition and experiences, a form of truth I have called “subjective” or “experiential truth” in the previous chapters.

But there is more to say about Grunberg’s quest for truth. In Grunberg’s foreword to *Kamermeisjes & soldaten* [*Chambermaids & Soldiers*] (2009), the collection of his literary journalistic reports, the author writes, referring to Thomas Mann’s ideas, that his pursuit of truth is the search for ‘Wahrheits-Erlebnisse’ and therefore the artist has to do his job with an ‘Ernst im Spiel’. Grunberg says this is exactly what writing is all about: “‘Wahrheits-Erlebnisse’, this is what I’m ultimately looking after. (…) The earnestness, as Mann pointed out, is “Ernst im Spiel”, in other words, played earnestly. The highest form of earnestness which I can and will afford myself.”

The reason why I quote this passage is that it reveals much about the engaged attitude through which Grunberg himself – but also the other two

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124 Harbers 2010, p. 77.
125 Cloostermans 2008. ‘Ik hoop dat een particuliere, individuele waarheid (van mij of van mijn personages) eventjes groter wordt en de lezer overtuigt van de geldigheid van mijn blik op de wereld. Niet zomaar een visie overdragen, zoals in een opiniestuk, maar een onontkoombare waarheid over wie wij zijn.’
126 Grunberg 2009, p.9. “‘Wahrheits-Erlebnisse’, daar was het mij uiteindelijk om te doen. (…) De ernst is, zoals Mann al aangaf, “Ernst im Spiel” oftelw gespeelde ernst. De hoogste vorm van ernst die ik mij kan en wil permetteren.”
authors discussed in my thesis – conceive writing and thus language: with a certain earnestness, or one might say ‘seriousness’. This seriousness implies an urgency for the novelist’s task and a belief on the part of the author in the importance of his work for the community in which he operates. At the same time, I would say we can argue that this ‘earnestness’ or ‘seriousness’ can be understood as a request for mutual trust: the author takes seriously the community and his reader, while the community and the reader are invited to trust the author and the value of the literary work outside the borders of literature.

**Grunberg the novelist**

In practice, Grunberg’s quest for truths about ‘who we are’ means that the author’s novelistic writing, as observed by Thomas Vaessens, increasingly relies on non-fiction consisting in solid research and fieldwork of Grunberg the journalist.127 In *Onze oom* this is in the first place reflected in the novel’s topic (war and terror) which is a daily topic in contemporary media, but also a topic about which Grunberg often writes in his daily column in *de Volkskrant* and of course wrote about after his trips to Iraq and Afghanistan. That Grunberg writes a novel about this subject which he has entered several times through his non-fiction, testifies to the significance of his non-fiction for his fiction and his interest in contemporary issues which are high on the political agenda. Grunberg explains his interest in the topic as follows:

> In the West we are obsessively occupied with violence and war, even though we haven’t been involved in war for a long time. We do send soldiers to war, but with that, war still doesn’t draw nearer to us. (…) We occupy ourselves with war, but we want to keep it far away from us in every way possible. I think it [is] therefore justified to ask what that war entails.128

Not surprisingly, Grunberg admitted in the interviews after the publication of *Onze oom* that this book strongly relies on journalistic “immersive strategies”. To depict the protagonist of the novel, an army officer called Major Anthony, Grunberg drew on the experiences he had acquired during his journalistic projects in Iraq and Afghanistan. ‘Without these experiences,’ Grunberg says, ‘I would not have dared to write about militaries. I possessed the typical prejudices about “the” military. In their company, that image turns out to be diffuse and then

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127 Vaessens 2010, p. 312.
128 Harbers 2010, p. 79.
it no longer exist. You see individuals, rather than the military’. These words reveal much about Grunberg’s approach: he was able to write about the army because he had encountered soldiers as individuals, as ordinary human beings. Yet Grunberg does not merely fall back on his past journalistic experiences by writing *Onze oom*. In the case the author did extensive fieldwork exclusively for the novel. As he said, he investigated arms trade and interviewed several arms traders, and Grunberg visited a jail in Peru where he interviewed Lori Berenson. Then the author went to Bolivia where he explored a silver mine (an important location in the novel) and where he talked with the miners about their work and ‘El Tío’ (The Uncle), a ritual figure in the Bolivian mines (both the figure and the mines play a significant role in his novel). For his novel Grunberg is explicitly searching for new reports, information and documentation and he is interviewing and speaking to locals. Uncovering a ‘higher truth’ about ‘who we are’ means thus that the author is actively inquiring about how people think, live and make sense of their world. This questioning not only applies to Grunberg, but also to Eggers and Bon.

Yet in Grunberg’s case there is also a significant difference from Bon and Eggers. As we have seen, the attitude of the latter two consists in an intense and extensive engagement and investment with the community. In their immersive strategies, Bon and Eggers display a certain personal commitment with the involved people, thus serving as mediators or intermediaries. The authors are openly choosing the side of a group of individuals and with their narratives they convey to the other part of the community what it is like to be in their shoes.

By contrast, Grunberg’s approach is less committed and more journalistic in the sense that he is more impartial and ‘objective’, insofar as he does not rely on a group of individuals as a source of information in the way Bon and Eggers do. And this difference in attitude causes also a difference in the novel. As we saw, Bon and Eggers stay very close to the real by putting non-fictional elements inside the novel, for the reason that their narratives concern real human beings; the relationship of the author with these people is based on mutual trust and reliability and they bear a certain responsibility for them. But as we shall see in the next paragraph, Grunberg affords himself more fictional autonomy since he is not writing about

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129 Cloostermans 2008. ‘Ik had het niet aangedurfd om zonder die ervaringen over militairen te schrijven. Ik bezat de gebruikelijke vooroordelen over “de” militair. Als je in hun gezelschap verkeert, wordt dat beeld eerst diffuus en daarna houdt het op te bestaan. Je ziet niet meer de militair, maar individuen.’
130 Cloostermans 2008.
131 Lo Galbo 2008. Lori Berenson is an American who is convicted for her collaboration with the (terrorist) guerrilla group MRTA (Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement).
specific actual persons or issues, which means that his novel consists in a purely fictional world without explicit non-fictional references. And here we could observe a paradox in the working method of Grunberg. During his investigation he is acting more like a journalist in the sense that he is more ‘impartial’ and ‘objective’ than Bon and Eggers and thereafter he is shaping the information in a purely fictional form, whereas Bon and Eggers stay closer to the real information in a more non-fictional way.

Explicitly and implicitly engaged

Let me first summarize the novel’s plot before discussing it. *Onze oom* takes place during a war-time dictatorship in a non-specified country somewhere in South-America.\textsuperscript{133} The story focuses mainly on two protagonists: the first is an ‘immoral’ character, the army officer Major Anthony, who is a loyal servant of the dictatorial regime (this regime is frequently called ‘our uncle’, which corresponds with the novel’s title). The second protagonist is called Lina, who becomes an orphan girl after her parents, so called ‘suspect individuals’, are murdered. One night, Anthony is sent out on an operation to arrest the parents of Lina. But the operation goes haywire: Lina’s parents die and Major Anthony discovers there is a third person in the house, the little girl Lina. Major Anthony quickly decides to take the orphan girl as a token of his love for his woman. In the course of the narrative, which is told by a heterodiegetic, “omniscient” narrator, the reader follows the stories of these two protagonists. Later on Major Anthony, who carries out his work of arresting suspect individuals as diligently as possible in the hope that his dedication to the regime will turn him into a hero, is eventually convicted of crimes against humanity and war crimes by a civilian court and sentenced to death. When Major Anthony dies, the narrative perspective shifts to the other protagonist, Lina, who ends up as a successful arms trader after having worked for several years in a goldmine and sympathized with the rebels. On the final pages, we encounter a journalist in whom we easily recognize the image of the author himself: ‘He has a curious face. Asymmetric’.\textsuperscript{134} And there is another correspondence with the author. The journalist says: ‘“I try to come as close as possible (...). To the danger, to the destruction, to death”’.\textsuperscript{135} Here we see the journalist interviewing Lina, who has become an arms trader, to collect the information for the story we

\textsuperscript{133} Although the novel never refers to extra-textual geographical coordinates, it implicitly gives the impression that the plot is taking place in a dictatorial regime in South-America, for example via descriptions of the landscape, the weather, and the name of one of the protagonists (Lina Síñani Huanca), which resonate with features of South-American countries. Besides, Grunberg has admitted in interviews that the novel is taking place somewhere in South-America, see for instance Vandendaele 2008.

\textsuperscript{134} Grunberg 2008, p. 632.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, p. 637. ‘Ik probeer zo dichtbij mogelijk te komen (...). ‘Bij het gevaar, bij de vernietiging, bij de dood.’
just have read. More or less, at the end of the novel the author fictionalizes himself, since the author collected the material through similar interviews.

What immediately becomes clear is the big difference between *Onze oom* and the novels by Bon and Eggers: this novel does not explicitly refer to non-fictional elements; there is no direct reference to an extra-textual reality, such as geographical locations or real people, like the Lost Boys in Eggers’s case or the factory worker in Bon’s. Nor are there any obvious traces of non-fictional elements, like historical facts or other textual references to reports or documents. In the earlier case studies we have seen both authors obscure the distinction between fiction and non-fiction (between fictional and factual, non-fictional elements) with their collected ‘real’ material. This fuels the effect that the worlds of these novels more or less coincide with the actual world, or at least the documentary character of these novels reinforces the reality value and encourages a more “believing” reader response. Of course, Bon and Eggers explicitly present their books as fiction so their worlds can never really coincide with ‘the’ reality, but still they leave the impression that their fictions are in a more immediate sense valid in reality or related to it, since the non-fictional elements elicit a “believing” reader response, rather than the pure “make-believing” response of full-blown fictional texts. Yet in the case of Grunberg’s *Onze oom* the author is more respectful of the traditional distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Therefore the novel elicits a pure make-believing reader response, which is reinforced by small sensory and visual ‘reality effects’, as in the following two passages where attention is paid to minuscule details, such as the food on the table or the look of the character Lina: ‘She was standing beside the wooden table, still covered with the remains of an evening meal. Used plates, cutlery, candles, a newspaper, a pan with some food left in it. The burned crust of some kind of casserole? Rice with bits of meat in it?’ and ‘The little girl was holding onto one leg of the table with her left hand. She was wearing yellow pajamas. Her braids were not only long, but thick as well. And her hair was black, so black it looked almost blue’.¹³⁶

To shed light on this difference in my corpus, I’d like to introduce the distinction between explicitly and implicitly engaged novels. Whereas the novels of Bon and Eggers are good

¹³⁶ Grunberg 2008, p. 11-12. ‘Bij een houten tafel waarop de restanten van een maaltijd nog aanwezig waren stond ze. Vieze borden, bestek, kaarsen, een krant, een pan waarin nog wat eten zat. De aangebrannde korsten van een stoofschotel? Rijst met restjes vlees?’ (11) and ‘Het meisje hield zich met haar linkerhand vast aan een tafelpoot. Ze droeg een gele pyjama. Haar vlechten waren niet alleen lang, maar ook dik. En haar haar was zo zwart dat het bijna blauw leek’ (12). The translations of these two fragments are originating from the first chapter which has been translated into English (see: http://www.arnongrunberg.com/chapters/62). The translations which appear in the following pages are mine, while the original Dutch formulations will be put into a footnote.
examples of explicitly engaged novels, Grunberg’s novel is in my view an illustration of an implicitly engaged novel. Let me elaborate on this distinction. In my argument explicit means that the evoked world of these novels can be considered as an extension of the actual world of the reader, something which Bon and Eggers bring about by blending fictional and non-fictional elements. These fictional worlds are thus explicitly connected with the actual world: the relation is more direct and immediate. In the cases of Bon and Eggers, this means that the reader is easily able to identify the world of the novel as his or her world. For example, in *What* the reader can identify the I-narrator with the flesh-and-blood Valentino Achak Deng and in the case of *Daewoo* the narrator can be identified with the author himself. Both fictional characters thus seem to share the same world of the reader. Implicitly engaged implies then that there is no explicit relationship between the evoked world of the novel and the world of the reader. In *Onze oom* this means the fictional world and its characters do not share an extra-textual identity or existence. Rather, it is up to readers to establish connections between the real world and the fictional world by way of thematic (moral, ethical, political, etc.) interpretations, but these connections are never pointed out explicitly.

This distinction does not necessarily imply that an implicitly engaged novel like Grunberg’s is less relevant or less engaged than the novels by Bon and Eggers. As I have shown in the first chapter, an important feature of the engaged novel is that it is concerned with moral, political and social issues which are significant for its time. And this surely applies to *Onze oom*, which deals with numerous moral problems, ethical questions, political ideologies and social injustice with respect to contemporary society (something which I shall discuss more in detail in the next section). For now, I would like to clarify in what way *Onze oom* is implicitly concerned with the actual world. In order to do this, we have to focus more closely on the novel’s main protagonist Major Anthony. For almost 400 pages of the novel the reader is given access to the thoughts, beliefs and feelings of a character who is assigned the task of arresting civilians. What is striking about this character is that he has forsaken his own morality, ethical responsibility, and ability to question the orders the state gives him. In this quotation for example the narrator summarizes the core of Anthony’s beliefs: ‘The revolt had to be suppressed, that was his job. He fought for his country. For the state, who was watching over him as a good uncle and to which he would later justify why he had done what he had done. He was working for a better world’.137 The only rules Anthony obeys to justify his

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137 Grunberg 2008, p. 49. ‘Het verzet moest worden neergeslagen, dat was ook zijn taak. Hij vocht voor zijn land. Voor de staat, die als een goede oom over hem waakte en waaran hij later zou verantwoorden waarom hij ha gedaan wat hij had gedaan. Hij zette zich in voor een betere wereld.’
deeds are the laws of the dictatorship, for which he cherishes an ideological faith and a persistent dedication. ‘To him the law was a moral compass’, the narrator tells us. When at a later stage the protagonist is captured by the rebels and handed over to the civilian court, a trial unfolds in which the prosecutors accuse Anthony of his immoral and unethical attitude: in their eyes Anthony’s deeds are crimes against humanity and war crimes. Yet Anthony does not understand them; in his eyes he has just obeyed the laws and followed his desire to make a career: ‘I believe a military has the duty to do its job as effectively and professionally as possible. I have always been very dedicated to my work’. And therefore the character considers himself legitimized for his attitude towards these moral and ethical issues: ‘I admit occasionally I heard rumors about the less pleasant things which took place in our state, but I have dismissed these rumors because they would threaten the quality of my job when I took note of them for too long’. Striking in these quoted passages is that the author, as he explains in interviews, is making with this character a parallel to the case of Adolf Eichmann, the German Nazi who facilitated and managed the logistics of the deportation of the Jews during World War II. Similarly to Eichmann, who was convicted by a civilian court in Israel, Grunberg’s protagonist possesses the same ‘logistic talents’ and ideological dedication, he is not aware of the criminality of his deeds, and resorts to the same line of defense: he justifies his situation with the argument that he was no part of the decision-making process but merely following orders. Also striking is that Grunberg’s novel confronts the reader with the same ethical dilemmas and moral choices which were raised by the Eichmann trial, questions like: to what extent is Major Anthony a criminal? Can ethical decisions be made in time of war or under the pressure of a dictatorial regime? To what extent can Anthony be considered responsible for the cruelties of the dictatorship? By putting forward these questions, the author is asking the reader to take a stance towards these dilemmas.

The similarity of the character of Major Anthony with Eichmann is not the only reference to a non-fictional reality which is implicitly made. The novel shows that war and the system of a dictatorship is maintained by ordinary people with ordinary desires, like Major Anthony’s desire to build a career, but Grunberg is ambiguous about the war he is staging;

138 Grunberg 2008, p. 121. ‘De wet was voor hem een moreel kompas.’  
139 Ibid, p. 372. ‘Ik vind dat een militair zijn werk zo kundig en professioneel mogelijk moet doen. Ik was altijd erg toegewijd aan mijn werk.’  
140 Ibid, p. 379. ‘Ik geef toe dat ik wel eens geruchten heb gehoord over minder aangename zaken die plaatsvonden in onze staat, maar ik heb die geruchten weggewuifd omdat de kwaliteit van mijn werk in gevaar kon komen als ik er te lang bij stil zou blijven staan.’  
141 See Leyman 2008, where Grunberg states that ‘it’s hard not to think of Eichmann’ in the case of this particular character.
implicitly it refers to the Holocaust but also to contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or even more literally to one of the many dictatorial regimes of South America. This link with the Holocaust might be made by means of the resemblance with Eichmann, but the novel also evokes images which remind us of the terrors of WWII, for example in the following words of the civilian court’s prosecutor: “You are responsible for the arrest of hundreds, no, thousands of innocent civilians. You are responsible for torture, homicide and murder without the appearance of a trial”. The association with the contemporary war in Iraq and Afghanistan is also easily made for various reasons. Firstly, the novel repeatedly refers to ‘roadside bombs’, which are frequently used in the warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. Secondly, the characters in the state’s army continually say they fight the war against ‘the Northern provinces’, what can be read as a reference to Kunduz, the Northern province in Afghanistan where Western troops were recently stationed. Then there is also an episode in which Major Anthony is sent to rescue a group of trapped soldiers with too little material and manpower, something which corresponds to a situation in Iraq when American forces ignored a rescue operation that they found too dangerous because they were sent on the mission with a lack of equipment and forces. Finally, Onze oom also refers to violent, terrorist South American guerrilla movements and rebellion parties. An important role here is played by the character De Dirigent [The Conductor], who is a revolutionary. This character bears the nickname ‘Shampoo’, which is, as Grunberg explained himself, also the nickname of Abimael Guzman, the founder of the contemporary Peruvian terrorist group ‘Shining Path’, who was called ‘Shampoo’ for his skills of washing others’ heads. Just like this man, the character advocates an ideology of revolution accompanied by violence and terror.

What is at stake in these examples is that Grunberg presents his world as purely fictional, but implicitly the novel is referring to non-fictional elements or contemporary issues. More generally, the novel raises moral and ethical questions in times of war and about war itself, authority and the justification of violence, which makes the novel relevant for our understanding of the (ambiguous) morality of contemporary warfare. Moreover, and this is a point to be discussed more closely in the following section, by presenting the

\[142\] Grunberg 2008, p. 326. ‘U bent verantwoordelijk voor de arrestatie van honderden, nee, duizenden onschuldige burgers. U bent verantwoordelijk voor marteling, doodslag en moord zonder vorm van proces.’
\[144\] Vandendaele 2008.
\[145\] In the reception of the novel, also reviewers draw parallels with contemporary reality by arguing that ‘the dictatorial system and the revolutionaries, projected in a South-American country, is almost unnoticeably about our own reality’ (Cobben 2008) and that ‘we are the ones, the humans which Grunberg is trying to approach through his novels and journalistic articles’ (Van Dijk 2008).
characters as ‘real’ human beings the novel demonstrates the consequences of war and authority for ordinary individuals.

**Empathy and the experiences of ordinary people**

As we have seen, since 2005 Grunberg positions himself as a writer who is interested in the lives of others – see Grunberg’s motto: ‘I want to know how people do it, live’ – and centers his (fictional and non-fictional) work around the question of how human beings make sense of the world and their lives. Grunberg the novelist is thus a sort of anthropologist who desires to investigate how people manage their lives, which implies that the author is interested in how people live, what they think, desire or believe in. Grunberg nourishes this desire with journalistic strategies, but at the same time his curiosity about the other goes beyond the interest of the journalist: ‘It is newsworthy when a roadside bomb explodes in Afghanistan,’ Grunberg says, ‘but it isn’t newsworthy when a soldier chooses a pair of panties for his girlfriend. I do consider that news’. Even, or particularly, the smallest and most trivial details are relevant to Grunberg. What this quotation makes evident is that the author is interested in small and everyday details which characterize human beings as individuals rather than stereotypes.

This interest in the human as authentic and ordinary being is also at the center of *Onze oom*: the novel is based on a meticulous and ‘realistic’ model of the characters, which in concrete terms means that the characters are presented as ‘real’ human beings with ‘whole minds’, to adopt Palmer’s concept, made up by feelings, beliefs, desires, values, and the like. In the novel this means that the reader experiences what it is like to be a human under circumstances which diverge from the reader’s everyday experiences, because the novel takes place in a world of war and dictatorship and thus far from the Western audience. *Onze oom* shows how war and the authority of a dictatorial regime influence ordinary people: what moral decisions they have to make, the ethical positions they are forced to take and how these circumstances affect their behavior. The novel focuses especially on the lives of the two protagonists, Major Anthony and Lina, so that the personal and family tragedy of their lives is foregrounded rather than the tragedy of the political situation. In the case of Major Anthony, we read how he is struggling with his private life, and particularly with his wife Paloma. We read for instance the following significant statement: ‘Firstly, a soldier has to win the war at

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146 Harbers 2010, p.76.
home, only then he can win the war in the alleys, in the cities, in the mountains’. This statement contains one of the central ideas of the novel, which zooms in on how Major Antony fights the war at home with his wife and the child Lina, whom he considers as a gift to his woman to rescue his marriage: ‘“No,” Anthony said, “this is not a nightmare, honey. This is a gift. This is my gift to you. Isn’t this what you dreamed of? This was always your biggest wish”’.  

By focusing on the protagonist’s human side and approaching him as an authentic individual, the reader is invited to feel empathy for someone who is assigned with an inhumane task. This empathy must not be understood as the feeling of sympathy or compassion, but, to follow the definition of Katja Mellmann, feeling empathy is ‘a form of complex psychological inference in which observation, memory, knowledge, and reasoning are combined to yield insights into the thoughts and feelings of another’. So here ‘empathizing’ is seen as the ability to yield insight into others’ inner states. In the case of Anthony in Onze oom empathy might just be an attempt to understand the character’s inner states, since it is debatable whether readers are able to fully empathize with morally deviant characters. Let us for example take a closer look at the following passage where Major Anthony cannot understand his wife’s anger after he has handed her the child: ‘“I do not understand,” he said, “you still don’t understand it. This is my daughter. Since tonight this is my daughter. And therefore it is your daughter. Start loving her. Isn’t this what you wanted? A child to love? What are you waiting for? Why don’t you love her?”’. In this short example, the reader gets an idea of how the mind of this character is functioning, by which we are invited to empathize with Major Anthony, who displays totally human emotions which we can all imagine: the desire to make our partner happy. It may be a slightly strange way of showing love to the other and the reader may also share the puzzlement at seeing another woman’s child being brought to her out of the blue, but still the reader is able to identify the inner state of Anthony and could observe that Anthony is not a ‘monster’ but an ‘ordinary’ man with private feelings like us. This is only one example to illustrate my argument, but in

147 Grunberg 2008, p. 81. ‘Een militair moet de oorlog eerst thuis winnen en dan past kan hij hem op straat, in de stegen, in de steden, in de bergen winnen.’  
148 Grunerg 2008, p. 43. ‘Nee,’ zei Anthony, ‘dit is geen nachtmerrie, lieverd. Dit is een cadeau. Dit is mijn cadeau voor jou. Is dit niet waar je van droomde? Dit was altijd je grootste wens.’  
149 Mellmann 2010, p. 431.  
general the novel provokes an empathic reader response with this morally questionable character, because *Onze oom* presents a detailed model of his private thoughts and feelings which do not radically differ from our own experiences despite the fact that the character is in a totally different situation from the reader. This does not only apply to Major Anthony, but also to the other protagonist, Lina. When Anthony is sentenced to death, the narrative foregrounds her personal drama: the flight from Major Anthony’s house, her life in the streets, the period in the gold mine (where she is more or less raped), her joining the rebels, the death of her child and finally her becoming an arms trader.

As a consequence, *Onze oom* foregrounds questions of a personal and individual nature rather than political, questions like: what are the motifs and beliefs of a soldier who gives up his responsibility to make moral choices and forsakes his own autonomy? What are his intentions and personal convictions? What happens to such a soldier when he loses personal distance with respect to his work? What leads people to join the army or guerrilla parties? What does it take to become an arms trader? By approaching the characters with these questions in their inner and private context, *Onze oom* is concerned with the essential point of Grunberg’s recent conception of literature: showing how people live, how they think and behave. Therefore I would say the novel conveys a general model of human experientiality by focusing on human beings who have to manage their lives in the context of war and authority; this model might be valuable for readers because it enables them to empathize with individuals which live in contemporary contexts of war and authority.

**Moral and ethical reader response**

In the case of *What* and *Daewoo*, I argued that Eggers and Bon are emphasizing the experiential side of individuals who belong to a real-world community (which may impact the reader’s view of this community through empathy and sympathy for the fate of these people). Since Grunberg’s novel is not directly about specific ‘real’ people, I would say the novel does not provoke this reaction among reader, but in my view the novel is rather trying to elicit a powerful moral and ethical reader response in which the reader has to decide his or her own position towards moral messages, ideological positions, ethical issues, and political statements.\(^{152}\)

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\(^{152}\) See for example a moral message with a perverse inference: “If there’s hair growing, it’s no pedophilia,” the money exchanger said, who was now sitting on his knees. “If there grows hair, be it a very small tuft, or just five, six, or seven hairs, then it’s legal. A few hairs and I know: it is allowed” (144). An ideological position is taken in the following passage, where Major Anthony’s defends his own position towards the detention of innocent people: ‘I’ve always taken the view that my fellow officers had to decide on their own what they were doing.
Not only towards several moral and ethical issues the reader has to decide his or her own position, also on the character level Onze oom demonstrates that morality in time of war is vague and complex because Grunberg does not present a clear-cut distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ characters or victims and perpetrators. For example, we would probably call Major Anthony a war criminal, but since he is presented as an ordinary human being with feelings, beliefs and desires, we may find out that he is actually quite ‘normal’. Or the other protagonist, Lina, is presented as a victim since she is kidnapped by Anthony and a victim of the state’s terror, but at the end, Lina appears to be not so innocent because she is called a ‘profiteer, a trader in death, a hard and polished business woman’. Then there is the character of The Conductor, who is also a victim of the dictatorial regime but as a revolutionary he is propagating violence: ‘Now the Gods have been dethroned and the authorities debunked, there is only one real authority left (…): the naked violence’. Finally even the position of the civilians is ambiguous: they are presented as victims of the state but in some sense they are also the perpetrators because they support and encourage terrorist attacks, as it becomes clear when Major Anthony says: ‘“There is a public support among the population for the actions of terrorists,” he said routinely, almost disinterestedly. “In the areas under their surveillance, they have ensured a degree of security and stability. This has increased their popularity”’. It turns out that in these examples seemingly immoral and unethical positions are put forward (for instance the position of Major Anthony), while commonly accepted moral and ethical attitudes might be considered reprehensible (like the position of the revolutionaries who are propagating violence). To conclude, Onze oom outlines a coherent and comprehensive worldview but the moral in this worldview remains ambiguous and polyphonic as the novel presents a variety of perspectives on how several characters think, feel and behave within the same context. In my interpretation this leads to a richer, more Decisions are made because of a certain threat, and I’m convinced in our situation the threat was realistic, and still is. Such a threat justifies the less pleasant decisions which were taken.’ (379) With respect to ethical issues, the novel is addressing questions like: is it unethical to kill somebody who is badly injured? Major Anthony says for instance about this: ‘Life was not always better than death’ (115). Another ethical question: is it right to offer 80 soldiers to rescue 135 trapped soldiers? An issue about which Anthony thinks the following: “Sometimes sacrifice had to be useless, sometimes this was ethically justified” (267). Finally, we read political statements like “We are all tools,” the man says. He wipes his mouth. “The state considers us as tools, the mine considers us as tools, the village considers us as tools. The problem is that the state does not distinguish between good and evil people, just between sound and unsound tools” (512).

153 Grunberg 2008, p. 634. ‘Een profiteur, een handelaar in de dood, een harde en geslepen zakenvrouw.’
154 Ibid., p. 555. ‘Nu alle goden ontrooid zijn en alle autoriteiten ontmaskerd, is er nog maar één werkelijke autoriteit overgebleven (…) het naakte geweld.’
155 Ibid, p. 234. ‘Er bestaat onder de bevolking een draagvlak voor de acties van de terroristen,’ zei hij geroutineerd, bijna ongeïnteresseerd. ‘In de gebieden die zij controleren, hebben ze voor een zekere mate aan veiligheid en stabiliteit gezorgd. Dat heeft hun populariteit vergroot.’
polyphonic picture than the other two novels, which seem to want to persuade the reader of a certain worldview, whereas Grunberg is rather putting the reader to work. In this way, I would say the novel stirs reflection on a range of issues and could be considered as a “moral laboratory” (to quote again Hakemulder’s term), a moral experiment which the reader undergoes and, at the same, carries out as he or she tries to determine his or her position towards these issues.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen in this chapter, for Grunberg journalistic projects, like his journeys to Iraq and Afghanistan, function as an ‘oxygen mask’ for his novelistic writing and enable him find answers to the central question of his writing: how do people live? Slightly differently from the other two authors, Bon and Eggers, Grunberg’s engagement relies less on a personal commitment and investment with the community; instead, Grunberg is in his working method more investigative, impartial and ‘objective’ in a journalistic sense. This is also notable in the novel: in contrast to Bon and Eggers, Grunberg does not blend fictional content with non-fictional elements in order to provoke a more believing response. The world of Grunberg’s novel is purely fictional in that its elements do not usually have a real-world counterpart. Therefore I have made the distinction between the explicitly engaged novels of Bon and Eggers and the implicitly engaged novel of Grunberg. The latter refers only indirectly and by way of interpretation to non-fictional and contemporary social and political issues, such as the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the ambiguous moral and ethical decisions people involved in a war have to make.

Like his contemporaries Bon and Eggers, Grunberg plays the “language game” in a serious, involved and committed way. There is, to put it in Mann’s terms, a certain “Ernst im Spiel”, a notion which reveals much about the engaged attitude through which Grunberg conceives writing and thus language: with a certain earnestness, or one might say ‘seriousness’ towards the community and the world. This leads Grunberg to look for “higher truths”: truths about who we are, about the human condition, something which seems to apply to Bon and Eggers too. With *Onze oom* we see that this “higher truth” has to do with the question of how it is to be a human in times of war and under the oppression of dictatorial regimes and what it says about the nature of the human being in these situations. In the novel, Grunberg is demonstrating this by giving an authentic and ‘human’ face to an immoral character, which has ‘real’ human feelings and beliefs which diverge from that of average (Western) audiences. Even if *Onze oom*’s two main protagonists live under unfamiliar
circumstances, the reader is invited to empathize with them because they are depicted as individuals with perfectly human feelings, beliefs and desires. By approaching the characters as ‘normal’ and authentic individuals, *Onze oom* demonstrates that seemingly immoral and unethical positions might be defended, whereas seemingly ethical attitudes can be questioned. In sum, what summarizes the engagement typical of Grunberg’s writing is that he engages with relevant societal topics and that his novel asks the reader to take a stance towards these moral and ethical issues, so that the novel might influence the reader’s attitude or perspective towards contemporary wars.
Chapter 5

Conclusion. The engagement of late-postmodernist language-games

It is time for some conclusions and an interpretation of what has become apparent in the previous chapters about the new literary engagement of the contemporary authors which have been the subject of this thesis. As Thomas Vaessens has argued, contemporary fiction writers have abandoned the postmodernist attitude of relativism and cynicism and have obtained a new position which implies an emphasis on a new form of engagement: late-postmodernism. In the first place I have tried to demonstrate that this development towards late-postmodernism implies a shift in writers’ conception of language. The authors which I call late-postmodernists here do not make use of language in a postmodern way, that is to problematize its referential ability and to demonstrate the instability of language with procedures like metafiction, self-reflexivity and other experiments with ontology. Instead, as I have argued with the Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, these fiction writers deploy language in ways that foreground its social and cultural function. As Wittgenstein argues, participants of communities play “language games” in order to give meaning to and make sense of their world. What we see is that the authors use language as a communal instrument, in order to forge connections between people and to interfere in reality. Therefore I have argued that the use of language of late-postmodernists could be defined as a particular kind of language game. With their language games, the authors open a channel of communication which aims at providing the community with new meanings about contemporary societal topics and share the experience of seeing the world through a particular language use. In the first instance their language game consists in a personal form of communication between the author and the community through personal commitment. Secondly, this language game implies a literary text which is oriented to the public domain. It deals with topics which play a role in contemporary reality: the texts tries to involve the audience with these subjects in order to convince them of a certain worldview or encourage them to determine their position towards the addressed societal topics. In this way, these novels bring to the fore a communicational as well as a social and cultural function: these literary texts aim to interfere in the reader’s worldview and to play a role in the public debate.
and in this sense the authors discussed here restore the disruption in the process of literary communication engendered by postmodernism.

As indicated in the first chapter, the author’s intentions are important insofar as they express a particular attitude towards life and the world which is tied to their language game. The writers’ attention goes out to the world: social issues, political debates, and moral and ethical questions. Furthermore this attitude assumes a high conception of the powers of fiction, something that can be captured with the following words of Eggers: ‘Novels really have the power to engender sympathy and empathy, and give us a sense of humanity’. Therefore the authors consider the act of storytelling as something that must be valuable for the community. “Useful” in the sense is that the writer helps groups of individuals have their story told – something that is particularly at stake with Bon’s and Eggers’s novels. “Useful” also implies a more pragmatic (or even instructive) function: the narrative is intended to be valuable for the reader in the sense that it tries to provide the reader with possible answers as to the question of how (not) to live and how other people live. In their attitude there is, as Grunberg formulates with a notion of Thomas Mann, “Ernst im Spiel”. That is to say, seriousness and sincerity—notions which imply an urgency for the novelist’s task and a belief on behalf of the author in the importance of his work for the community in which he operates.

In his study Vaessens defines this new engagement of late-postmodernism as a kind of literature which is interested in journalistic topics, but we have encountered that the engagement demonstrated by these authors does more than display an interest in journalistic subjects, it is much more radical for the reason that it displays the ambition to intervene in reality. Yet journalism is playing a role in this kind of engagement, since one can notice an inclination towards journalism. This means that the authors are appealing to the tools of the journalist and there is a pressure on the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, so that the distinction between literature and journalism becomes less rigid. As I shall argue in the next section, it is this influence of journalism in which we may find the novelty of this new engagement.

**Media criticism**

What I have noticed in each case study is the turn towards reality driven by the authors’ criticism of media. Their engagement implies a focus on journalistic topics. Refugee issues and the condition of African countries, social and political consequences of financial crisis,
war, terror, and violence: all these subjects seem to belong to the agenda of the journalist. By focusing on these topics, these novels establish some kind of relationship between literature and journalism – a relationship in which the novelist shares the same thematic interest as the journalist and elaborates on journalistic immersion strategies. Yet, paradoxically enough, this inclination towards journalism is arising from the novelist’s dissatisfaction with the efficacy and value of contemporary journalistic discourse in general. On various grounds, as we have seen, the authors take issue with the role fulfilled by contemporary media in our society. Eggers criticized the American media for their superficial and volatile interest in the other and accuses the newspapers of their flawed representations of the Lost Boys. Bon is blaming the media for their focus on the political and economic side of the issue so that the true issue, the social misery of the victims, never gets mentioned. And Grunberg criticizes journalism for its commerciality, superficiality and the excessive attention it pays to sensational topics of hypes and scandals. What this criticism suggests is that in the authors’ eyes the mainstream media do not bridge or fill cultural gaps, but rather create or enlarge them. Media, in other words, seem to have forsaken their focus and critical position towards society. As a consequence literature is taking over a task of journalism: all three novels offer perspectives and positions towards various social, political, ideological or ethical issues of contemporary society, challenging commonly accepted standards of representation (standards which among others are established by media) of the involved people and ideas about the topics they address. What strikes me, is that the novels of Bon, Eggers and Grunberg at this point are explicitly assigned with a “political” task to intervene in collective ideas, which links up with a central argument of Jacques Rancière’s recent aesthetic thinking, in which he is concerned with the relation between arts, aesthetics, literature and politics. Here I can only discuss Rancière’s philosophy in broad strokes, but it is important to say that art and literature in Rancière’s view have to play an active critical role in society, influencing our thinking about the world by ‘doing’ politics. Politics, as Rancière argues in his article *The Politics of Literature* (2004), has in the first place not so much to do with a commitment to social and political issues, but:

(…) politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some
specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.\textsuperscript{157}

With the term “politics” Rancière thus means a system that establishes what can be thought and represented by the society. Yet Rancière does not think that this system of ‘ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking’ is constructed democratically. Rather, it is imposed to the public and contemporary media discourse plays an important role in this. According to Rancière, media like television, newspapers or images determine the form of this “politics” because they stage certain authority figures (such as journalists, scholars, and experts) who govern the conventions of what can be thought and how the world can be seen. According to Rancière, arts and literature have to ‘do’ politics by offering new ways of ‘being, doing and speaking’. So, within this conception, the arts and literature react against media discourse. As a result, as Bram Ieven explains in his discussion of Rancière’s book \textit{Politique de la littérature}, literature ‘introduces new aspects of life, and can as such be seen as an intervention in life – an intervention which makes formerly excluded elements tangible’.\textsuperscript{158} If literature is actively concerned with this “politics” it could thus achieve some degree of impact on reality because it brings to light new aspects of life which otherwise were underexposed or neglected by media discourse.

I think in this theory we may find the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary literature’s engagement with, and move towards, reality: this kind of literature takes seriously the critical task described by Rancière, namely problematizing the established order by revealing new ways of being, doing and speaking. This might also be the point where this contemporary kind of engagement differs from previous forms of literary engagement. Nowadays, the importance of media discourse and its influence on society has increased drastically and what we see is that these authors use the novel as a genre with which they try to interfere in reality in the sense that they question and negotiate the collective ideas which media discourse has established or failed to establish. In this connection, the function of these novels may be summarized with what Hubert Zapf calls literature as a form of “cultural-critical metadiscourse”. According to Zapf’s argument, literature ‘engages with the cultural systems, categories, forms of consciousness and communication within which we predominantly live and interpret our existence’.\textsuperscript{159} One of the ways literature could play a role

\textsuperscript{157} Rancière 2004, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{158} Ieven 2008, p. 145; my translation.
\textsuperscript{159} Zapf 2001, p. 87.
in this ‘ecological field’ is, according to Zapf, by offering a “cultural-critical metadiscourse”, in which it represents and criticizes the ‘deficits, contradictions and deformations (...) [of] political, economic, ideological and utilitarian systems of civilisatory power’. In this light, the novels addressed in this project work as a “cultural-critical metadiscourse”, because these novels do not stand alone, but rather start a dialogue with other discourses, offer a critical reflection on political, economic and ideological powers in our society and as such establish interrelationships within the cultural system.

**Concluding points**

To conclude, on the basis of my results I will list some points which are characteristic of the “language game” of the late-postmodernist writer and his or her novels.

– *Media criticism and cultural-critical metadiscourse*. As I have argued in this chapter the novelty of contemporary literature’s turn towards reality is that the authors respond to the media discourse with their novels. So the resurgence of engagement implies a critique of media through a renegotiation of the reality shaped by the media themselves. These novels offer new ways of being, doing and speaking by negotiating the standards of representation. The writer feels responsible and capable of filling the cultural gap which journalism has caused or left behind. Characteristic of this kind of contemporary engagement is thus literature’s move towards the task traditionally performed by journalism. Finally I have argued these novels fulfill a function of literature which Zapf calls a “cultural-critical metadiscourse”: these novels start a dialogue with other cultural discourses and as such they criticize and reflect on political, economic and ideological powers in our society.

– *Immersion strategies*. This turn towards reality means that the authors use New New Journalism’s “immersion strategies”: writers commit themselves personally to certain events and the involved community. So the work of the writer partly moves towards the province of the journalist: the field of the public realm. During his immersion journalistic tools are functional to the writer, tools like “interviewing”, “research”, “documentation” and “scene investigation”.

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160 Ibid., p. 93.
– *Modes of engagement.* On the basis of my corpus there are two modes of engagement which can be distinguished, modes which differ in intensity. On the one hand this engagement, as we have seen in Bon and Eggers, consists in an intense and personal interaction with the involved people. The writer stands behind a certain group of individuals of the community and the narrative is meant as an attempt to do justice to the position of these individuals in the community. In this mode the author emerges as a mediator or intermediary, he has a certain responsibility for these individuals since the author’s relationship with the affected people is based on mutual trust. The other mode of engagement, which is typical of Grunberg, leaves more room for artistic autonomy in the sense that the author is not writing about the lives of real individuals and thus his representation is not tied to standards of falsifiability and correspondence with reality. This mode of engagement implies fewer obligations of the writer towards reality, so that the author conveys and legitimizes more his own views on certain issues on the basis of his investigation rather than relying on the story of others.

– *Autonomy and engagement.* Rather than in a purely aesthetic and stylistic dimension, the value of these literary works can be found in their thematic dimension: the text derives its value from its relation with the social and political issues it addresses. This is at the expense of the pure autonomy of the text – a view according to which the literary work derives its value from its formal and aesthetic qualities. Yet this does not imply that the aesthetic qualities are unimportant for the author. What we see is that the authors explicitly make use of the genre of the novel in order to safeguard some of the autonomy which the non-fiction writer cannot afford. Unlike the non-fiction writer, the fiction writer is not obligated to present adequate representations of the actual world which can be verified. Whereas Bon’s and Eggers’s statements can be verified to some extent and imply a movement towards non-fiction, Grunberg’s novel is purely fictional but still tries to make connections with reality on a more interpretive level with regard to moral, political and ethical issues. Yet the authors emphasize that they turn towards fiction for the foremost characteristic of fiction: the ability of artistic invention. At first sight this seems to imply a contradiction. The authors use a ‘false’ instrument to convey a sense of reality. Yet the authors stress that it is precisely the illusion of fiction which evokes a “reality effect”, making the narrative more credible and thus painting a more “lively” and affective world for the reader. The contemporary engaged writer has not completely abandoned an autonomist position nor has the text lost its aesthetic qualities. The literariness and the engagement of this literature do not contradict, but reinforce each other.
– **Blending of fiction and non-fiction.** In effect we observe an increased pressure on the borderline between fictional and non-fictional elements. At this point I made a distinction between the explicitly engaged novels of Bon and Eggers and the implicitly engaged novel of Grunberg. With the former the blurring of fiction and non-fiction is brought about by the reference to non-fictional, “world-constructing” elements which according to Doležel are representations of the actual world which can be judged true or false (like historical events, facts and numbers of social, political or economic issues, the involved people and parties, geographical coordinates, and the like). As a consequence of this blending of fiction and non-fiction the relation of these novels with the actual world is more direct and immediate: these texts can elicit a stronger “make-believing” reader response precisely because the narrative contains also non-fictional elements which elicit a “believing” reader response. Grunberg’s novel does not blend fiction with non-fiction so obviously and for this reason I called it an implicitly engaged novel: the novel can be taken to refer to several non-fictional elements, like actual historical persons and contemporary issues, without explicitly mentioning them. As a consequence this novel activates a pure “make-believing” response: with *Onze oom* Grunberg, in contrast to Bon and Eggers, does not blur the distinction between journalism (i.e. fact) and literature (i.e. fiction).

– **Wholeness and coherency.** Characteristic of these novels is that they outline a comprehensive worldview. Instead of the fragmentation and disruption offered by postmodernist novels, these novels provide a fictional world characterized by wholeness and coherence. As we have seen, *What Is the What* does so through the reconstruction of the memories of the protagonist, *Daewoo* is an attempt to distill a coherent worldview out of a variety of different language uses and a variety of memories, while *Onze oom* juxtaposes several perspectives within the context of war and dictatorship to demonstrate the ambiguity of moral dilemmas and ethical difficulties. These novels offer the reader a coherent worldview, therefore contributing to the production of meaning about the human condition and the world.

– **Empathy and experientiality.** Perhaps one of the most obvious things returning in each novel is that they are centrally concerned with the rendering of a meticulous structure of what Monica Fludernik calls “experientiality” in order to let the reader experience what it is like to be a human being under the circumstances of certain contemporary issues. The characters of
these novels are approximated as ‘real’ human beings complete with, to refer again to Alan Palmer’s notion, “whole minds”: they are represented with characteristic human features such as emotion, desires, values, and so on, so that the reader perceives a relatable and lifelike picture of the character. In all three novels the ‘victim’ is a recurring figure, something which may elicit an empathic or sympathetic reader response since the reader is invited to feel for the fate of these characters. By focusing on their subjective and experiential life the novels are seriously concerned with the task to give an insight into human existence and expose new elements of life, like ways of feeling or thinking. At this point a revived form of truth seems to come into play: the novels are dealing with the pursuit of new truths, or “higher truths” as Grunberg proposes, which can be understood as subjective and experiential truths in the sense of self-knowledge and knowledge of others.

– Literature and politics. The paratexual surroundings of the novels call attention to the authors’ specific way of framing their work. With their writings they want to achieve some kind of intervention in the reader’s life – for instance by influencing his or her worldview or way of thinking about (groups of) individuals or certain social issues, something which can be nicely summarized with the quotation from Rabelais which serves as the epigraph of Bon’s novel: ‘showing one half of humanity how the other lives’. The intended effect of this literature thus has a political character. This means not merely that the novel deals with social and political topics, but also, as I have argued earlier in this conclusion with Rancière’s help, that they attempt to negotiate the standards of representation and intervene in reality by bringing to light new elements of life (such as ways of feelings, thinking, experiences or positions and arguments about social and political issues). In sum, these authors and novels are actively concerned with the task of contributing to collective ideas, often going against the grain of media.

– Literature and ethics. As a result of their focus on social and political issues and their interest in real, flesh-and-blood human beings who have to cope with certain situations, it can be argued that these novels seek to fulfill a moral and ethical function. Literature in these cases is clearly intended to increase the reader’s understanding of other people in the world and it triggers the reader’s ability to empathize with others. Jêmeljan Hakemulder would call this the “pre-ethical” effect of literature, what means that literature enhances the readers’
critical thinking.\textsuperscript{161} It is interesting to see how the examined authors take seriously this ethical task. All these texts seem to invest in what Timothy Aubry calls the “therapeutic” function of literature: eliciting emotional and empathic reactions in readers in order to bridge social and cultural differences within a community. To return to the survey of the \textit{Groene Amsterdammer} about the most influential 21st-century novels (already mentioned in the introduction of my thesis), the magazine concluded that the contemporary novels highlighted by the survey pay attention to “the Other”. This is also one of the most important foci of all the novels addressed in this thesis. In Dave Eggers’s words, these three novels may ‘engender sympathy and empathy, and give us a sense of humanity’\textsuperscript{162}.

\textsuperscript{161} Hakemulder 2000, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{162} Siegal 2007.
Works cited

Introduction


Chapter 1


Chapter 2


Chapter 3


Chapter 4


Chapter 5


