

Art and/as Anarchy: Portraying the Artist during Times of Turmoil and War

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Summary

Two South African novels, *Congo Song* (Cloete [1943]1973) and *Moxyland* (Beukes 2008) comment on the central part played by artists and their work in the midst of a society on the brink of war. Both narratives are set in Africa; one portrays a close-knit white community in the Congo in 1939, facing the collapse of their colonial way of life, the other depicts the apocalyptic nature of a dystopian Cape Town around 2018, reflecting the global reality of environmental catastrophe, deadly epidemics and state and corporate tyranny. In both texts art and artists play pivotal roles within a group of characters, and their views of their work, the multiple manifestations of creative art and the relationship between their specific communities and what is regarded there as art, form an integral part of the narrative whole. This article focuses on how various textual strategies are exploited to reveal how the creative urge is linked with resistance against as well as support for destructive violence. It also discusses aspects of the novels that are structured to, on the one hand, endorse the quest for romantic aestheticism and, on the other hand, forecast the reign of cyberspace and genetically modified art.

Opsomming

Die belangrike rol wat die kuns en kunstenaars speel binne 'n konflikbelaaide gemeenskap word in hierdie artikel aan die hand van twee Suid-Afrikaanse romans bespreek. *Congo Song* (Cloete [1943] 1973) en *Moxyland* (Beukes 2008) speel albei af in Afrika; die eerste verhaal vertel van 'n klein groepie blankes wat op die vooraand van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog hulle gemaklike lewe in die Kongo moet verlaat; die tweede is 'n apokaliptiese uitbeelding van 'n bedreigde Kaapstad rondom 2018. Kunstenaars is die sentrale karakters in albei romans en hulle siening van hulle werk, die veelvuldige vorms wat die kreatiewe kuns aanneem en die besondere verhouding waarbinne gemeenskap en kuns staan, is 'n integrale deel van die narratiewe geheel. Die verskillende tekstuele strategieë waardeur die kuns as 'n wapen teen verval en geweld gebruik word, maar ook dat die kuns daardie geweld kan ondersteun, is die fokus van die analise. Hierdie artikel toon ook dat die romans aan die een kant romantiese estetisisme ondersteun, maar aan die ander kant die oormag van die kuberruim en geneties gemodifiseerde kuns voorspel.

The fact alone of bringing forth a beautiful work, in the full sovereignty of one's spirit, constitutes an act of revolt and denies all social fictions Whoever communicates to his brothers in suffering the secret splendour of his dreams acts upon the surrounding society in the manner of a solvent and makes all of those who understand him, often without their realization, outlaws and rebels.

(Pierre Quillard,
“L'anarchie par la littérature”, 1892)

Political power is controlled by the corporate elite, and the arts are the locale for a kind of guerrilla warfare in the sense that guerrillas look for apertures and opportunities where they can have an effect.

(Howard Zinn in an interview with
Resonance Magazine, 2004)

1 Introduction

1.1 Artists and War

To question the meaning of art, and the relationship between art, the artist and war during times of turmoil and war, is part of a historical and ongoing debate. It is also one that is relevant to some of the great thinkers of our times – Susan Sontag, Ernst van Alphen and Walter Benjamin¹ are just some of the participants who come to mind. It was the German philosopher Adorno who articulated the powerful opinion that *aestheticising* war, terror and exploitation, neutralises the horror of such acts of violence and diminishes the anguish of the victims (Adorno in Bal 2009: 46).² In the Spanish novel *The Painter of Battles* (2007), the main character is a famous war photographer who turned battle painter and who is going to be killed by one of his earlier subjects, a former Croatian soldier. The reason for his fury, as this tormented man states, is that “photographing people is the same as raping them ... and sometimes it forces them to die” (Pérez-Reverte [1997]2007: 249).

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1. Susan Sontag: “Regarding the Torture of Others” (23 May 2004); Ernst Van Alphen: *Caught in History. Holocaust Effects in Art, Literature and Theory* (1997); Walter Benjamin: “The Task of the Translator” in Hannah Arendt’s *Illumination* (1968).
 2. Adorno, Theodor. *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (1962).

The yields of this complex relationship between violence and the representation of violence as art have become familiar cultural concepts to most people. Arguably some of the greatest of all Western art is the work created by Leonardo da Vinci; da Vinci who was not only a chronicler of battles (Leighen 2009: 35) but also the designer of war machines, “the first person to think of fragmentation bombs” (Emmer 2001: 23). Amongst other timeless “icons” of war art are the Bayeux tapestries, the sketches by Goya and Picasso’s mural “Guernica”, great narratives like Homer’s *Iliad* on the Trojan War, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Catch 22* and *Slaughterhouse 5*, the British poets of the lost generation of the First World War and the Vietnam movie “Apocalypse Now”. In South Africa the Border War Literature of the nineteen eighties formed a broad movement and created a defining moment in literary history, which had its postmodern offshoot at the turn of the twentieth century when the now century-old Anglo-Boer War was revisited in various forms by most of the serious Afrikaans authors (Roos 2008).

This article, however, neither partakes in the complex debate on the morality of depicting atrocities, nor does it attempt/set out, as Peter Paret does in his *Imagined Battles: Reflections of War in European Art*, to observe the parallels in “society’s efforts to come to terms with the reality of war and of the artist’s use of war as a metaphor for the human condition” (Book-stores.com). My focus is on a narrower issue; a look at how, in a fictional world, the relationship between the artist and the prevailing conditions of war is portrayed in narrative form.

1.2 War Artists

Throughout history there has existed a state-commissioned art which paid artists to portray the images and events of war, in most instances from a specific, patriotic point of view. Apart from the countless monuments commemorating wars and their heroes and museums exhibiting the spoils of war, there is, for instance, the British example of modern times. In 1939 a new art scheme was set up in the UK, initiated by Kenneth Clarke, then Director of the National Gallery. Before the end of the year the War Artists Advisory Committee, on a budget of £5000, had assigned prominent artists to the Admiralty, the War Office and the Air Ministry. Over the next six years, it would buy and commission work from more than 300 artists, amassing a collection of more than 5500 works which were split between the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and museums and galleries around the country. In addition, the IWM would come to own diaries and letters that war artists kept, which offer personal and intimate verbal glimpses of their various experiences. The aim of this project was manifold: to preserve a generation of artists whose livelihood had been threatened by the culture of

war but also, most importantly, to convey and strengthen the image of a united and defiant country (Lewis <<http://www.culture24.org.uk/history/war/world-+war+two/tra27960>>).

1.3 Artists against War

More often though, it is the artist as outsider, or in rebellion against the prevailing situation and the official position on a specific war or war in general, who defines the relationship between art and war. The “Guernica” created for the 1937 World Fair, represents “modern art’s most powerful anti-war statement” (“Guernica: Testimony of War” <<http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html>>); the depiction of Vietnam through artistic image and text undermined blind patriotism; the subversive role of the young Afrikaans authors writing amidst or about the Border War represents a crucial phase of protest in Afrikaans literary history (Roos 2008).

Perhaps the most explicit link between art and/as anarchy and anarchism was first used in a positive social and political sense in 1840 during a time of great political upheaval – forged during the late nineteenth century in France.³ As is stated in the Quillard quote above, the very fact of creating and appreciating art was to be seen as an act of rebellion against the status quo. This revolutionary point of view still has its followers. The American radical historian Howard Zinn, best known for his book *A People’s History of the United States* (1992) – of which by 2003 more than a million copies had already been sold – has throughout his career emphasised the crucial role that protest and civil disobedience play in energising and directing social change. In his latest work, *Artists in Times of War* (2003), Zinn tracks the different manifestations of artists’ resistance to war. His definition of this role is twofold. In the first place “the artist is telling us what the world should be like, even if it isn’t that way now” (Zinn 2003: 8). In the second place, and perhaps more important, the role of the artist is to transcend conventional wisdom, to transcend the world of the establishment, to transcend orthodoxy, to go beyond and escape what is handed down by the

3. Anarchist philosophy and the term “anarchist” (“without government”), began with Pierre Joseph Proudhon’s bitter analysis of the state in mid-nineteenth France: *What Is Property* (1840). Proudhon rejected the notion of improving state structures in favour of abolishing them. Although many anarchists subsequently engaged with Marx, all rejected his state-based solution to economic injustices. Their positions ranged from extreme individualism, to the concept of an expansive global network of rural communities and respect for nature, to a series of revolutions interspersed with periods of “evolution” to reach a classless equality of race and gender. Anarchism specifically appealed to artists in its critique of the social status quo and in its vision of an egalitarian and stateless future in which art and leisure would take their rightful places at centre stage (Leighen 2009).

government or what is said in the media (p. 11). His comments made at the beginning of the twenty-first century stress the anarchistic necessity of art in a corporate-controlled planet. In an interview with *Resonance Magazine*, also available online, Zinn stated that “[p]olitical power is controlled by the corporate elite, and the arts are the locale for a kind of guerrilla warfare in the sense that guerrillas look for apertures and opportunities where they can have an effect” (<http://www.sevenstories.-com/book/?GCOI=583221000-46150>).

1.4 Artists at War: The Narrative

This article reports on a reading of two South African novels, *Congo Song* (Cloete [1943]1973) and *Moxylant* (Beukes 2008) that comment on the central part played by artists and their work in the midst of a society in turmoil. Both narratives are set in Africa; one portrays a close-knit community in the Congo in 1939, facing the collapse of their colonial way of life at the outbreak of the Second World War, the other depicts the apocalyptic nature of a dystopian Cape Town in 2018, reflecting the global reality of environmental catastrophe, fatal epidemics and state and corporate tyranny. Cloete and Beukes seem to be firmly rooted in the specific societal conditions existing during the respective periods of publication. Cloete was not only a very young and impressionable soldier during the First World War and an exponent of “romantic colonialism” (www.stuartcloete.com; Roos 2010) but also travelled Africa extensively and specifically the Congo, and much of the atmosphere as well as specific scenes in this novel can be traced back to his travel writing published as *The African Giant* (1956). Beukes has been involved with science fiction and animation writing, but states that specifically her work as freelance journalist “has granted me a pass out of my middle-class comfort zone and into the most interesting part of the city, from the Koeberg nuclear power plant to six-star boutique hotels that play host to popstars and politicians to taking a stroll with electricity cable thieves through the townships” (Lotz 2010). In both texts art and artists play pivotal roles within a group of characters, and their views of their work, the multiple manifestations of creative art and the relationship between their specific communities and what is regarded there as art, form an integral part of the narrative whole. The focus is on how various textual strategies are exploited to reveal how the creative urge is linked with resistance against as well as support for destructive violence. It also discusses how narrative space is structured to stress, on the one hand, the quest for romantic aestheticism and, on the other hand, forecast the reign of cyberspace and genetically modified art.

2 Place and Space

2.1 Africa

Both novels are set in Africa, and as indicated by their titles, the narratives are firmly linked to specific – even if imaginary – places. Although the eras portrayed – the eve of the Second World War and South Africa in 2018 – are clearly removed from the reader’s current situation, both novels depict times of conflict where survival balances on a knife’s edge. Both novels articulate stark contrasts in the grouping and nature of the characters; these groups are shaped by vast socioeconomic differences, violently opposing power centres, and visible, seemingly impenetrable boundaries.

In the Cloete novel, *Congo Song* ([1943]1973), the title refers to the then Belgian Congo and the presence of a close-knit group of whites settled there. When war breaks out in Europe at the beginning of September 1939, these people leave the colony because of a series of deaths and killings related to the war situation, but also because their opulent lifestyle could no longer be maintained in the face of personal and historical events. The narrative concludes with the statement: “This was the Congo song: the song of the sluggish rivers, of the mountains, the forests; the song of the distant, throbbing drums, of the ripe fruit falling, of the mosquitoes humming in the scented dusk; the song of Entobo, of the gorilla and the snake. The song no white man would ever sing” (p. 316).

Although the fictional events are set in a now bygone era and refer to a long-past war, the present-day reader, aware of the tragic events following the granting of independence, of the ongoing ethnic wars and political strife in a postcolonial Democratic Republic of the Congo, experiences this “background” history of violence and war as an enduring and inherently disruptive space.

With regard to the Beukes novel, the title evokes an image of a fun-filled and perhaps escapist spot (Disneyland? Neverland? Graceland?); an interpretation that seems to be supported by the cover picture of what appears to be a cuddly soft toy or cartoon-like creature. “Moxyland” is set in a terrifying future of not overt military warfare, but of endemic social and economic conflict manifested as environmental collapse and cyber tyranny. This is “Mad Max” territory, where the government’s dictatorship is protected by a merciless police force armed with lethal laser guns and backed up by biotech-enhanced attack dogs. City life is all that exists – those outside of it belong to the unknown, ignored “rural”. The secluded elite consists of the managers and IT programmers working for the sinister, all-powerful corporations; the masses are restrained by means of their cellphones and Internet connections without which no social identity exists. This discrimination is based not upon race or gender, but on economic status. And Moxy, “a dino-beastie thing with a toothsome grin and beady

black eyes”, is the mascot and logo of a children’s video game, part of the competitive “war out there in virtual mutacute land” (Beukes 2008: 58); a game that sometimes ends in brutal death. Although the setting is explicitly defined as Cape Town in 2018, this dystopian cityscape detaches itself from the limitations of a specific country, and enters a globalised combat zone.

2.2 Congo Song

The small but diverse group of characters (the beautiful femme fatale Olga Le Blanc, her cuckolded scientist husband and his Belgian assistant, two Americans, a French doctor, two German spies, a South African trader and a painter without nationality) live on a botanical research station in the scenic eastern Congo. The whites are completely isolated from their surroundings as a result of colonial attitudes: politics, racism, money and cultural arrogance are the powerful tools for maintaining their separate identity and status. This community is, however, racked with internal conflict: all the men vie for Olga’s favour while her closest companion, a gorilla she has raised from birth and named Congo, intimidates all the men; the American missionary is torn between lust and disgust; the impending war is the trigger for spying, betrayal and murder.

Amongst this array of complex characters Sebastian, the artist, is portrayed as an almost simplistic figure. In recalling his countless love affairs and his current relationship with two black Congolese sisters, he is portrayed as the stereotypical libertine and immoral bohemian. He is an internationalist (“... no flag, no birthday ... no papers; he spoke French with a Spanish accent, Spanish with a German accent, German with an Italian accent, English with a French accent. But he spoke them all to perfection” (p. 39); “Where had he not been, this ridiculous painter? The South Seas, South America, Spain, France ...?” (p. 117). He is the embodiment of the archetypal romantic artist with whom he fully identifies:

Gauguin had gone to the South Seas. He, Sebastian, had come here. (p. 12)

He had known other artists, Sebastian was only those men extended, physically prolonged, drawn out to the limit. (p. 107)

Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin ... they worked with their hands, with their thumbs, like me. And Picasso. (p. 118)

I belong to a great family: the greatest: the family of artists. (p. 39)

He is fascinated by his two wayward mistresses, by their careless attitude and grasping nature, and the huge, colourful canvasses inspired by their exotic beauty demonstrate his passionate linking of beauty, sex and art. “Behold Leonardo tormented by black nymphs”, the doctor jokes (p. 99). His conversations are held “in the full glory of rage, of furious energy, of artistic depression; a man woman-mad; frustrated, thwarted by his inability to portray the visions that he saw” (Cloete [1943]1973: 95). And what does he see? “A black nude. He saw her in his mind: tremendous, Nubian, voluptuous, with hanging pear-shaped, green-shadowed breasts ... heroic” (p. 61).

Yet this is a man who resorts to violence when his “honour” is attacked. He storms out looking for revenge against one of the German spies because this man had first seduced and then assaulted one of Sebastian’s Congolese mistresses, and he perceives his venture as “an act of war” (p. 259). This action reveals another side of the tempestuous painter – he had fought in the Spanish Civil War, was a member of the International Brigade, worked with explosives, killed at Guadalajara, and was cited for bravery (pp. 9, 59, 270). But Sebastian’s motives are primarily egotistic; it is not the concern for justice or altruism, or an ideology that drives him, but his obsession with art:

His anger at the Fascists, his participation in the Spanish War, had been due to his fury at those who prevented creation, who refused to let the world go forward, who interrupted its progress and with it his own.
(p. 150),

and

[h]e hated Fascists for making him fight them. That was their greatest sin. He had lost more than two years’ work by this. True, he had seen some beautiful things, some terrible things. He had afterwards made sketches, pictures which he considered superior to Goya’s. But his soul had been damaged. He had also sustained two wounds, and had been promoted to the command of a company, but these facts were accepted as a by-product only of the years, and uninteresting when compared to the time wasted and the spiritual damage done to his soul by war.
(p. 253)

In many instances the focus is on Sebastian’s unworldly, almost childlike nature. Although he also is one of Olga’s former lovers, he is one of a very few humans who relate to the ferocious gorilla. He has no idea how devious his mistresses are, he is careless with possessions and money, he looks unkempt and neglects himself. He is described by the others on the station, and specifically the American visitor, as foolish and impractical; his paintings are not highly valued, he is generally regarded as a harmless lunatic (p. 20). But Sebastian is also the eternal optimist and could be

described as a true anarchist, if that term is used in its original meaning of “believing any government to be unnecessary”. It is therefore quite ironic that when the settlement implodes with the spies being murdered, the Belgian scientists and the gorilla killed and Olga fleeing, it is the impractical Sebastian who clears up the legal issues by contacting the relevant authorities, taking charge and writing the required letters because “my writing shows character ... in addition it is beautiful” (p. 295). He is the one least unsettled by the tragedy, “delighted at the turn of events which was all very dramatic, colourful” (p. 303). He decides not to join the departing Europeans, but to “move on over the face of Africa, fighting, painting, working, making love and discussing the love that he made” (p. 303). In Cloete’s novel the portrait of the artist is perhaps a supreme example of a romanticised relationship between art and war: the larger than life artist as joyful anarchist, brave soldier and ultimate saviour.

2.3 *Moxyland*

In Beukes’s futuristic dystopian novel, the stark divisions – spatial, economic and social – between the haves and the have-nots are occasionally bridged by a gallery of artists. Kendra, the failed artist and art school dropout (p. 47), sells her body to a large company to become a live advertisement for a new health drink, a “nano-enhanced hormone soup”⁴ named Ghost and thus gains a shaky foothold in the world of the ruling class. Not only does this drink boost her physical reactions and mental awareness (although it causes an unquenchable thirst), but it turns her skin into a living canvas, displaying in green and silver the shifting swirls of the Ghost logo. Apart from Kendra, the company has also signed similar contracts with twelve others, “not art punks necessarily [but] they are hot talent. Young, dynamic, creative, on the up, the perfect ambassadors for the brand” (p. 4). Kendra is also a photographer – and photography is validated in this narrative as a fully fledged form of art – surreptitiously taking photographs of the forbidden corporate space and the forgotten dredges of humanity with an ancient Leica camera. She is preparing for her debut in a group exhibition showing her quirky images. She meets Toby, another dropout; once a student studying for a master’s degree in literature but who

4. Nanotechnology –

“the control of matter at nanoscale: one billionth of a metre” – is the technology of the future Materials behave differently when they are made up of nanoparticles. Sceptics are worried about unpredictable health and environmental risks. It is possible that nanoparticles penetrate cells more readily than larger particles. Nanorobots could spiral out of control and replicate themselves. Nanotechnology is “messing” with nature’s building blocks and, therefore unethical (“The Science of the Tiny Is Big News”, *Pretoria News*, 16 February 2009, p. 12).

has now turned into an obsessive blogger who video-records his daily life with, and displays the resulting images by “streamcasting” them onto, an electronic coat he is wearing all the time (p. 11). Toby is also involved with a small group of activists because they provide him with blogging material. Tendeka, the leader of the group, a throwback to the idealistic student revolutionaries of the nineteen sixties, has been involved in numerous civil protests and is passionately committed to a doomed art-project supporting street children doing graffiti murals.

The group exhibition in which Kendra participates, is organised by Sanjay – “a major name on the international art scene, responsible for launching the trajectories of people like Susu Ngubane and Cameron Stirling, whose sculptures now sell for in the region of R700k” (p. 51). The exhibition centres on three displays: “intricate paperwork mobiles on a massive scale”; Kendra’s photos, and then the showpiece created by the “legendary” Khanyi Nkosi. The latter is an audio animal installation, an example of the latest international and very pricy trend – a genetically modified live object, probably a kind of gorilla.

Zinn’s statement that “the arts are the locale for a kind of guerrilla warfare” (Zinn 2004) succinctly prefigures and paraphrases the conflicts played out in Beukes’s narrative. The crisis is triggered when Tendeka and his followers deactivate and destroy one of the gigantic roadside advertising boards. This act is particularly galling to the authorities as it destroys the official art of this era: the creations of the corporate world.⁵ They then carry out an “anarchistic and nihilistic” (p. 208) invasion of the art exhibition, where they hack some of the police dogs to pieces, and destroy the “gorilla” in a horrifying scene that ends littered with blood and body parts, accompanied by the howls of the dying “thing”. And yet, the art critics and the guests are not really offended:

There is a prevailing undercurrent of thrill, a rush from the violence – no one was hurt, apart from Khanyi Nkosi’s thing. Everyone is on their phones, taking pictures, talking.

(p. 137)

This attack is followed by various acts of urban terrorism. The city is turned into a full-blown “war zone” (p. 207) when an anti-pass protest march gets

5. In a very recent article dealing with the impact of advertising, its author referred to advertising posters being taken up in the permanent collection of the British Museum in London. He also states that “the advertising campaign has broken loose from the world of marketing and is now part of the real world” (my translation). But even more noticeable, a well-known designer is quoted as having said: “[T]he boundaries between culture and advertising are fading. Advertisements have become ‘the art of the idea’” (“Geld Wat Stom Is”, Harry Kalmer. In: *Rapport Weekliks*, 12 July 2009, p. 1; my translation).

mixed up with a violent video game played out in real life. The police is at first unable to restrain the ensuing chaos, but then deliberately infects the population with a deadly virus in order to regain control. Tendeka who has been urged by his treacherous virtual mentor, the *agent provocateur*, to bomb some of the clinics where the antiviral vaccine is distributed, is infected and suffers a gruesome death. As Kendra has also been exposed to the virus, she seeks refuge at the headquarters of the Ghost company. It is decided that her nanotech infusion has gone wrong and she is terminated in the “military”-like building (p. 231). The sole survivor of the group is Toby, who escapes with recordings of the terrible events – “a total Sony exclusive” of the annihilation; he is determined to sell them to the highest bidder (p. 236).

As in *Congo Song*, double-dealing, betrayal and even murder characterise the various relationships, but the artists’ visions of themselves and of what they are doing are very different to Sebastian’s during that earlier, almost quixotic time. In *Moxyland* every vestige of idealism or altruism crumbles as roles are exchanged: the leaders become the victims, the insignificant turn out to be the powerful, the talented are the failures. The meanings of art and of anarchy are equally devalued. Toby’s streamcasting of the attack on the exhibition gains him an eager market for his repulsive images and garners more attention than the exhibition ever would. In his sensationalist report Kendra’s photographs are described as an interplay of “light and texture like an old Dutch Master” (p. 142), but he also suggests that the prints are selling so well because they have been spattered with the blood of the hacked-up “bio-mod creature” (p. 143). In contrast to Sebastian, these young people experience reality as cold and shallow, yet they find “beauty” in the callous or the artificial. Mr. Muller, the old school photographer who develops Kendra’s archaic spools of film, needs to brighten up his dungeon-like apartment with an electronic “wall2wall set on Karoo; pale light over scrub hills complete with a windpump, metal blades turning idly in a breeze you could almost convince yourself you felt. It’s an idealised version of the Rural, peaceful, as far removed from the real thing as you can get” (p. 59). But Mr. Muller is also a social coward who throws Kendra out when he fears that she can be associated with

[a]narchy? Undermining our way of life? And what’s that going to prove? More to the point, what’s it going to change? This is only going to lead to more severe controls. But we need them, Kendra, I’m telling you, humanity is innately damaged. It’s a flaw in the design code. We’re weak. We’re fallible. We need to be told what to do, to be kept in line.

(p. 208)

This juxtaposition of conflicting values is echoed by the characters’ involvement in the mixed reality of the electronic world. The ease with which they inhabit the world of Sims, real-world gaming and continuous

blogging,⁶ contrasts sharply with their foolhardy activism, naïve credulity and awkward opportunism. They are not so much guerrillas amongst, as the ultimate dupes of materialistic exploitation, cunning entrapment and fatal betrayal. The artists are portrayed as gullible and ineffective; ultimately they all fall short.

3 Structure and Style

In his discussion of the relation between art and violence, Adorno often referred to the *stylisation* of real-world politics – that is to say, the techniques through which violence, terror, war or exploitation are turned into something that can be perceived as “art”. In literary terms that would mean introducing structure and pattern into the representation of the brutal events (Bal 2009: 46). Some aspects of this structured representation in the two novels are discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.1 Narrators

The motif of polarisation, that is, of dividing the fictional worlds into rich and poor, black and white, colonists and colonised, the elite and the subordinates, is persuasively articulated by the multiple voices through which the narratives are presented. *Congo Song* is divided into 38 numbered and differently titled chapters following in chronological order, each placing the accent on a different character, although in the subsections of a chapter the focus may shift briefly. There is no first-person narration; the personalities of the whites are revealed either through extensive dialogue, their thoughts about one another or through long descriptions and disclosures by an omniscient narrator.

Almost every chapter includes some reference to Sebastian and thus contributes to elucidating his character. In chapter 6 for instance, “The Dinner Party”, all the whites are present and engaged in animated conversations. When the spy Von Brandt drunkenly shouts: “The true artist is Aryan. Our Führer is a great artist”, an infuriated Sebastian responds with “The artist is international” (Cloete [1943]1973: 146). In chapter 7, “The Morning After”, breakfast at the doctor’s house is described. It is attended

6. Sims: an interactive social simulation game in which the gamer creates virtual realities by customising, modifying and personalising the avatars and the environment. The premise of real-world gaming (which in 2009 was still an idea for the future), is that gaming is done in virtual as well as real time, with the players taking on preset roles, controlled by a Game Master. The interaction of “actors” who are part of the game with those everyday people who are unaware of a game being played, provides the special thrill (“Nerds: The Final Frontier” 12 July, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 2009, pp. 5-7).

by three men. The spotlight is on the American who has fallen in love with Olga at the party the previous night. But the appearance of Sebastian (“Ha! Here comes the painter”; p. 69) changes the articulation of Wilson’s specific experiences into a general discussion on beauty and art and affords Sebastian the opportunity to exclaim: “I have no confidence in man. Only in artists ... the artist is the flower of humanity” (p. 76). In this manner the contrasts between Sebastian and the others are identified and stressed.

The indigenous population is viewed as an amorphous and voiceless crowd. The exceptions are the trader’s servant Jan, Sebastian’s two black mistresses, a witch doctor and a Masai messenger. However, they are afforded only fragments of dialogue and short flashes of description. Moreover, those instances of “characterisation” are entirely focused on depicting how primitive they are. The thoughts of the two sisters about their life with their “master” mostly reveal their grasping and shallow personalities. When Sebastian thinks about them, his thoughts become a jumble of colourful images linking his experiences of beauty, art and war.⁷

The narratological pattern in *Moxyland* appears to be completely different from that of *Congo Song*. Descriptions of the narrative style in reviews of the novel repeatedly refer to the “newly coined street slang and futuristic techno-lingo” (Spath 2008), which apparently “snaps and pops with neologisms and geek-speak” (Heyns 2008). The novel is branded as “cyberpunk” – “a genre that features advanced technology coupled with a degree of breakdown or radical change in the social order” (Pillay 2008).

Taking this stress on the “jazzy”, the clever slang and the techno-jargon into consideration,⁸ it is quite startling to note that there are meaningful

7. “He turned toward the girls again. They had not moved. He would never know what they had been doing ... a *tableau vivant* representing what? They stood looking at him. Only his dog ran forward He hoped his girls had not touched his paints. They were like children, but beautiful. Deer ... Fascista ... the green of young bananas With primrose a pale mauve would be better. But they did not like mauve. Complementary colour How the sun struck the satin of their brown shoulders ... dark pools at their feet ... pools of shadow Shadow was wet like black water A springing deer arrested by death ... a hunter ... a hunter upon a hill ... Guadalajara ...” (Cloete [1943]1973: 13-14).

8. The meeting between Kendra and Toby is described in such a way that the specific tone of a casual, futuristic lifestyle, incorporating both violence and art, is perfectly conveyed:

“Why do you do that?” she asks, nodding at my BabyStrange, which is back in display mode, with a new addition to the gallery of a close-up of a blood spat on the green pool-table felt. “It’s really gross.”

“Would you rather I displayed logos?” I tap the cufflink with my thumb, zoom in on the can of Ghost, snap it, and wallpaper it solid over the smartfabric.

similarities between the two novels. *Moxyland* is also clearly divided into consecutive chapters, each one named for the four interrelated narrators: Kendra, Toby, Tendeka and Lerato. It follows the same pattern of dialogue and description as in *Congo Song*, but in this case all the narrators speak in the first person, which creates an atmosphere of isolation and alienation – no one has any insight into the inner life of the other characters.

There is also a fifth “voice”, that of the online messages, presented visually in a different font and looking similar to the typed messages received on laptops, cellphones and other kinds of monitors. The novel thus visibly depicts a world in which these characters experience virtual reality in as authentic and valid a manner as their everyday lives; for the most part their interacting with the former – the virtual world – delivers better results. Toby’s connection to the real world is maintained by gaming and his BabyStrange recorder that also provide him with a living; Tendeka abandons his long-time lover when he slavishly follows the instructions of an avatar⁹ in a virtual community, organising the revolution according to this creation’s disembodied commands. The war game inserted into ordinary daily routine attracts mostly nondescript people: “in real world Doyenne is a taxi driver in her mid-40s – maybe a tad decrepit for fun and games. But who am I to thwart her recreational? Cos that’s what it’s about, right? Recreations of lives you could never live” (p. 156). The members of the police force are barred by legislation from opening their mouths, and pre-recorded, electronically conveyed messages reduce the possibility of human emotions in their handling of any unrest (p. 165).

She laughs in a brittle self-conscious way, but the conversation flows easier after that. She’s a photographer, and she uploads a flyer for a group show at Propellor to my phone. I trade her an invite to the Replica Insurrection party. Provided I don’t get too fucked, I might even DJ. But I hold back on the plus one. I’d prefer her to rock up on solo mission. She tells me about a set of photographs she took in the loos there, photographing streaks of light under the doors, of all things to document in a club culture.

She’s annoyed at the suggestion. “I specifically didn’t want to photograph the usual club crap. It was about decontextualising the space.”

(p. 19)

9. A computer user’s representation of him-/herself or alter ego, whether in the form of a three-dimensional model used in computer games or a two-dimensional icon (picture) used in Internet forums and other communities. It comes from the Sanskrit word *Avatara* which means “incarnation” but which in English has come to mean “an embodiment, a bodily manifestation of the Divine”. The term was popularised by Neal Stephenson in his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (1992). The recent blockbuster film “Avatar” (2009-2010) is indicative of the attraction of this alternative world.

3.2 Place, Space and Flow¹⁰

In his studies on the information age and the new technological paradigm, the philosopher Manuel Castells (2000) created the concept of “spaces of flow” to refer to the notion of space, time, and their dynamic interaction with society in the digital age. This is a new type of space, enabling synchronicity and real-time interaction without physical proximity, distinct from “spaces of place” – the localised experience of cultural and historical specificity. The multidimensional relationship between place and space, and then specifically within a postmodernist frame of reference, has also become a focus of attention for those interested in literary texts. That the limited and regional nature of place can extend to a universal and metaphorical space is one of the outcomes of structured narration. A brief look at how the particular locations of the two novels are transformed into generalised space follows below.

The district of Mokala, the background to the Cloete novel, is a fictitious place, but clearly modelled on historical and geographical reality (Roos 2010). I have already mentioned (par. 2.1) that the present-day reader, aware of the current news bulletins about ongoing conflict and strife, would be extending the relevance of that 1939 setting into the present and possibly future Congo battlegrounds. But this expansion of space and time occurs over an even wider spectrum. *Congo Song* does not remain limited to chronicling the battles of one man and his eccentric ideals. For instance: in his rebellion against accepted order, Sebastian compares himself to Saint Sebastian, “a martyr. They shot him full of arrows and they beat him to death with rods. This other Sebastian encouraged those who were being put to death for being Christians. He was a Roman Captain” (p. 125).

Sebastian’s entrance into a larger, almost infinite space forms a motif that is also supported by other aspects of the novel. He has not only been a real soldier, but also acts as a warrior against Evil. In the midst of this “evil paradise” that is Africa (p. 275), his “extraordinary garden expressed its owner. Its piled masses of vegetation, its flowers and fruits, its vast disorder, achieved a magnificence of design. It was as if, casting his seeds, letting them fall where they would, Sebastian sowing blindly, inevitably made beauty” (p. 158). This particular description of “taming” the African wilderness is a striking articulation of what could be called Romantic colonialism, a trend that is clearly present in much of Cloete’s work (Roos 2010).¹¹ (See also the telling presentation of the Cloete home page at

10. Manuel Castells ([1996]2000) coined the distinction between “spaces of place” – the localised experience of historical and cultural specificity – and “spaces of flow” – the globalised experience of cyberspace.

11. Bunn (“Embodying Africa: Woman and Romance in Colonial Fiction”) discusses Haggard’s novels and states that romantic writing demanded the

www.stuartcloete.com where the quotations on war and beauty echo Sebastian's ideals.) And in the final instance Sebastian seems to attain immortality:

I have never known that I existed ... not even in the Spanish War. Yes, I was there, but I was not here. Sebastian was not there. He was just watching another man called Sebastian who was there ... laughing at him ... mocking him.

and

Today I am alone. No one resembles me ... I am new ... unintelligible ... but in a hundred years I shall still be Sebastian.

(p. 157)

The development of a series of vivid metaphors and images supports this reach into an extended space. In the case of *Congo Song* it is an extension into the realm of the metaphoric and symbolic though, as the title of the book also suggests, it still firmly evokes a space of places. In *Moxyland* the title already points towards the primacy of virtual space, Castell's "spaces of flow". I want to look at only two of these meaningful patterns.

The first is the presence of a monster; in *Congo Song* the half-tamed pet gorilla named Congo, and in *Moxyland* the "sculpture": "red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers It is an animal" (p. 128).

In *Congo Song* Sebastian is closely linked to this gorilla, not only by his acknowledged ability to communicate and pacify the angry creature, but also when he claims, "I am a man who believes in animals" (p. 115). But this attitude is not shared by the other characters. Although Congo saves his mistress's life by tearing apart the German spy before he is shot himself, he also represents to the colonists those Africanist myths and fables embodying what is seen as the evil fetishism associated with darkest Africa (Roos 2010). Congo is buried with a stake through his body, and the American priest describes the surroundings as "evil ... beyond prayer" (p. 314). Through the identification with this animal, Sebastian becomes associated with something ancient, something spiritual and larger than life.

The genetically modified animal in *Moxyland* is exhibited as a piece of art, but it is also a symbol of the diminishing stature of the humans around it. Its creator is an egoistic, opportunistic money-grabber (p. 142); Tendeka aims his destructive acts at this helpless animal instead of its powerful masters; the reactions of the crowd at the gallery after the animal was tortured and killed show their lack of empathy.

elevating of individual achievement, heroic amateurs and the primacy of the conquering masculine.

In a similar vein the second group of images – various references to war, and the metaphoric linking and even intermingling of war and art, and in the process almost eliminating the human – is notable. The booster shot given to Kendra is a “silver capsule like a bullet” (p. 4); the syringe resembles a gun (p. 5), she is warned that she will at first feel unwell because her immune system is now “at war with nanotech invasion” (p. 6), and the mysterious doctor Precious who injects her looks like a Giacometti sculpture (p. 6). When Tendeka surveys the future battleground, he describes the huge advertisement board as “set like an easel on its giant pylon legs” (p. 71); the result of his act of sabotage will be that the “image that gets displayed is garbled and incomplete like that painting with the melted clocks” (p. 73). Kendra’s admiration for Muller’s old photographs is a remarkable articulation of this metaphoric link.

My favourite is the mangled wreckage of a truck engine embedded in the sludge of a dried-up irrigation pond The image is beautiful, almost black and white, although he shot it in colour. It’s the time of day and the way he’s worked the light that washes it out. But it’s the evocative simplicity of the context, of the meaning he’s brought to a landscape that’s impressive. It’s easy to gut-wrench with people: Tiananmen Square or Kevin Carter’s vulture baby or the Bangladesh Children’s War, but investing in an inanimate object with the same quality is an accomplishment.

(p. 61)

In the Cape Town of 2018 the cityscape is marked by concrete boundaries and unyielding divisions: the highways and “underway” separating the masses in their shacks from the tower blocks and exclusive dwellings. However, this entire setting is strewn with visual signals of a hotchpotch of interrelated activities: the street children’s graffiti (“It was a way of letting them make a mark on the city that usually filters them out like spam”; p. 26); the electronic images of the gamers, bloggers and advertising boards; the controversial exhibitions by the trendy “artists”.

Perhaps the most distinctive quality of the spatial dimension is that it harbours a mixed reality (Gordon 2009: 7).¹² This is of course not only true of a fictional or futuristic community. The manner in which current events have often been reduced to selected electronic images for any of those not directly in the line of fire is evident to all living in the age of CNN, Facebook and Twitter. “War has become mediatized”, was a statement made almost a decade ago (Emmer 2002: 1), referring to how real anguish

12. In a recent advertising campaign the Nokia representative repeatedly referred to the capabilities of the latest phone model in offering the buyer a “mixed reality” He explained this term by discussing the use of the GPS system on a cellphone: customising the pre-loaded maps to the owner’s individual needs and integrating the system with gaming directions (Gordon 2009).

can be transformed into fleeting images. In *Moxyland*, however, Castells's "spaces of flow" have metamorphosed from abstract concept to commonplace fact. Tendeka, for instance, at every opportunity enters – as a subterfuge from, and in the hope of improving his ordinary life – a virtual community called Avalon. Here he has created his ideal house called Monomotapa; here he communicates exclusively with his soulmate and mentor, an avatar named skywalker (p. 31).¹³ This is his chosen world where the war against the real world is planned; from this space he receives the advice to accept corporate sponsorship for his mural project; from this "address" come parcels with explosives to destroy the state.

One of the reviews of the Beukes novel ended with the statement that the book has extended beyond its borders; the reviewer (Pillay 2008) referred to the availability of a soft toy in the image of Moxy and to the sale of a CD with music chosen by the author as it sounds in line with the narrative atmosphere. The reader will also notice the prominently displayed web address on the first page (www.moxyland.com), inviting one into a virtual world. Moving beyond borders is indeed what has happened here.

4 Conclusion

"I believe in the power of beauty, thus in the power of art and human creativity in general. I do not see the role of art at the beginning of the 21st century in reflecting circumstances of chaos and poor relationships among people. This seems too passive."

(Krašek 2002: 230)

In these two novels art and artists and war – however broadly one chooses to interpret the three concepts – are interrelated in diverse ways. Art as, or the artist in, resistance to domination, violence, exploitation and war is perhaps the most enduring and potent aspect of this relationship. This resistance can, on the one hand, be shown by striving for an ideal world or, on the other hand, by revealing what is repulsive in the present one.

Sebastian speaking as the Romantic Artist is the embodiment of the first option:

By the nature of his work the artist is forced to walk abroad unarmed, keyed up to receive the impressions of the outer world, ready to feel the flight of the birds ... ready to see the play of light and shadow on the

13. The names indeed point beyond ordinary spaces:
 skywalker – the name of the taciturn hero in the movie "Star Wars"
 Avalon – in the Arthurian legends the name of the beautiful island associated with immortal beings
 Monomotapa – the mythical city of gold in the interior of Africa

street, the colour of a woman's dress reflected in her eyes. Only unarmoured can he receive these things and know them.

(*Congo Song*, p. 126),

and

You speak of youth, but the artist is youth itself He is without cynicism, perpetually hopeful.

(p. 146)

In this instance art represents the creative and individualistic impulse instead of the authoritarian and the destructive; it presents humanity with images of what it could be, instead of what it still is.

The second option is the one chosen by Kendra and her crowd; they acknowledge and reveal the appalling conditions around them. Anarchy is part of their lifestyles, but, also not wanting to be "just another impoverished Michaelis student",¹⁴ they strive for recognition by the elite, be it through financial or artistic success or by destroying that selfsame elite.

In the particular style of each narrative, and not entirely without ironic wit, the different choices are articulated. After the "devastation" Sebastian chooses to go his own way and to remain in Africa, "fighting, painting, making love" (*Congo Song*, p. 303). Toby, the only survivor of his group, is off to sell his images, "out of the door into a whole new bright world, feeling exhausted and exhilarated And thirsty" (*Moxyland*, p. 236). He also has survived a catastrophe and is ready to profit from it, but unaware that he is already infected with the nanotechnological disease.

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