The Post-postmodern Change of Climate in Contemporary Novels: A Different Perspective on the Environment?

An analysis of Jonathan Franzen's novels *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010)

Thesis Master 'Literature in Society' (Leiden University)

Name: Danique Roozekrans

Student number: S1343602

Supervisor: dr. E.A. Op de Beek

Second reader: dr. B.K. Ieven

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Preface

Being born in 1994, I personally started reading around the turn of the century. Soon enough, books became, and still are, one my biggest interests. After completing a bachelor's degree in history (next to the obvious link with this first love; a choice I made because of my curiosity for cultural developments), I found myself writing a paper that would get me into the masters that would combine my two favorite subjects. Titled 'Literature in Society', I even coincidently came across an essay topic that sparked a whole new type of fascination and fit perfectly in the objective of the program. It all started with Dave Eggers' book *The Circle* (2013), possibly one of the first literary works on my bookshelf. When it first appeared, the eighteen-year-old me did not grasp its actual intention and just saw a dystopian novel. But, during a class on postmodernism, the literature student that was trying to understand the theories explained to her, suddenly had a revelation. This book from my youth might actually be at the center of a discussion on the status of contemporary literature.

After an essay specifically on *The Circle*, a pre-master thesis on (post-) postmodernism in the fictional work of Dave Eggers followed. I had noticed that this writer's books fit into the concept of postmodernism, but also contained some more inventive characteristics that did not match this long-standing literary tradition. It was only touched upon briefly in the last seminar of my course, but since the beginning of the current era; during the time I got into reading, we see some trends in literature that do not correspond with the prevalent postmodern movement. I learned to call this post-postmodernism, a genre characterized by dialogue and transparency. Subsequently, I delved into a discussion on the position of present-day literature that has arisen amongst academics in the past couple of decades. A consensus on the topic has not yet been reached, as we are only at the beginning stages of what is also named 'the New Sincerity'. However, scholarly research to contribute to this ongoing debate is certainly possible. This thesis is exactly that, an expansion on the knowledge I have accumulated concerning post-postmodernism, with a focus on my most recent passion: the environment. I hope you learn some from reading it.

Danique Roozekrans

Introduction

> The problem is that, however misprised it's been, what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem. You've got to understand that this stuff has permeated the culture. It's become our language; we're so in it we don't even see that it's one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony's become our environment (McCaffery 147-148).

It was 1993, when the late David Foster Wallace made this statement in a conversation with Larry McCaffery, an American literary critic. The insightful sketch of how he experienced the cultural setting of the 1990's, still carries importance more than twenty-five years later. The described chronotopes – or rather, this postmodern worldview – long dominated the Western literary field of study (Bakhtin 84-85). But a new perspective is in fact currently emerging: it is a movement in literature, as well as other areas of culture such as philosophy, architecture and art, that is most commonly referred to as post-postmodernism, the term that will also be used on the upcoming pages (Turner 10). Post-postmodernist ideas, while needing to be further defined, are very interesting when brought in connection to contemporary books that focus on environmental issues. This statement stems from the fact that the most important characteristic of post-postmodernism is the knowledge that man is able to change history, or at least has a responsibility to find an attitude to the problems of today that goes beyond irony and relativism. It was 9/11 that secured this revolutionary transformation of consciousness. Born in a time of insecurity, instead of the secure world of before the sixties, the work of a younger generation of writers notably expresses this change in perspective. We see a turn towards the expression of feelings; a revived concern for (human) beings; a time of connection and communication and, perhaps, also a renewed interest in our surroundings (McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction* 1-7, Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 1-2, Den Dulk 1-4).

Inexplicitly named the forefather of post-postmodernism by various writers, David Foster Wallace was one of the first to point out this innovation in the ruling mindset. But, the fact that the cultural sphere is presently different to that of the last century, is proven in artforms all around (the painting on the front of this thesis being an example of that). Certainly, in more recent literary publications, a definite reflection of this transformation of consciousness can be

found. Scholars from several other fields have noticed the recent depiction of an unmistakable shift as well: the research on the subject of a possible post-postmodernism, and what that would then exactly entail, has certainly sprung. Yet, because of its fairly newness, the amount of literary analytic work on specific, presumably, post-postmodern authors is limited. Coinciding with that, the amount of ecocriticism in connection to post-postmodernism's view on one of the biggest problems of our time, climate change, is slim. This is the exact reason for this thesis. It's a contribution to the growing domain of post-postmodernism that primarily focusses on the role of nature in two titles of the author Jonathan Franzen, and how he suggests dealing with this probable crisis through his work.

In order to analyze this recent literary movement and, specifically, highlight the image of climate change in contemporary novels, this thesis focusses on two works of Franzen that are often indicated to be post-postmodern. Mentioned in various accounts as having evolved into a post-postmodernist, and perhaps even more important, as a serious birdwatcher (consequently expressively concerned about the climate, as it influences the decline in wildlife), the author has been largely neglected in the now existent body of research on post-postmodernism. Remarkable, since his more recent work is certainly able to give the community at concern, some interesting insights (Andersen). The titles referred to are *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010). Both describing the lives of several members of a Midwestern American family, and following each other up in time, these novels are not only conveniently comparable, but hence this sequence, also deal with the challenges of their particular age and the distinct differences in generations. Through a close reading of these books, Franzen's cultivated outlook on environmental issues should become clear, as well as a broader understanding of post-postmodernism and its connection to nature.

After proposing a theoretical framework for both postmodernism and post-postmodernism, establishing their wishful attitude towards the environment according to ecocritics and giving a short introduction on Franzen, an analysis on whether and how the obtained understanding of post-postmodern principles relates to the novels chosen, will follow. Chapter 1, the theory, will mainly consist of the discussion of two core works, being *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (2015) by Brian McHale and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) by Linda Hutcheon, supplemented with some more recent and theme focused sources including Allard den Dulk's *Love me till my hearts stops: Existentialist Engagement in Contemporary American Literature* (2012) and Stephen J. Burn's *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (2011). Chapter 2 and 3 will subsequently analyze the respective novels and apply the ideas that emanated from this first stage of the research. As the

development that is post-postmodernism is expected to be a positive force when it comes to the current debate around climate change, this presumption could be rejected, as the newfound sincerity that is post-postmodernism possibly also has its limits. The question is how far a new aeon of writers, such as Franzen, will and can go, in order to save the planet, through books. Since the irony of postmodernism is still rooted deeply into our society, will its descendant post-postmodernism be enough to initiate an actual shift or mere pragmatism?

Chapter 1 Theory

Postmodernism

Before exploring what post-postmodernism exactly encompasses, it is of the essence to understand what preceded it. What this new movement called post-postmodernism entails, is wrapped up in a necessity to rethink and rework foregoing time and space. Just as postmodernism was the natural successor to a modernist way of seeing things, the postmodern chronotopes will give some vital information about what is to come, or, better yet, what currently is (Smethurst 1-30). In saying that, postmodernism is quite a complicated term that can be interpreted in different ways, as it has been over the last few decades. The definition used in this thesis is mainly based on the already mentioned *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, two of the leading theoretical works on the subject, that are naturally supplemented by several other publications in order to give a well-rounded understanding of post-postmodernism's predecessor.

Starting off with *The Cambridge Introduction;* according to Brian McHale's book, postmodernism can be called 'dead' now and thus be defined (1). To summarize his view: postmodernism was a dominant cultural tendency that stretched from 1966 until 2001, with four phases that were dominated by different ideas, but characterized by a certain dialectic of continuity, next to what obviously set these stages apart from each other. McHale calls the first phase 'the Big Bang', which dated from the mid-sixties onwards; the second phase was postmodernism's primary peak, between 1973 and 1989; third followed an interregnum that roughly coincided with the nineties; and the fourth and last phase that he addresses is the aftermath, dating from the year 2001 until the arguable emergence of post-postmodernism. To fully grasp McHale's definition of postmodernism, however, it is key to look at each of these periods individually, and take into account their continuities, as well as discontinuities (*Cambridge Introduction* 1-7).

The year 1966, McHale writes, was 'one of abrupt career changes, impasses and renunciations, interruptions and breakdowns, crashes literal and figurative, endings and beginnings and therefore chosen to be the starting point of postmodernism' (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 24). Especially apparent in (rock) music, the building blocks of postmodernism that were derived from this first period consist of 'breakdowns and breakthroughs, self-reflection and strange loops, paraworlds and subuniverses, proceduralism and rewriting, and avant-pop' (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 50). The sixties were, however, still very modernist in many ways and therefore sometimes even disregarded as a

starting point to postmodernism. These modern tendencies caused the movement to only really establish itself during its second phase, in the following decades of the seventies and eighties (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 22-61, Habermans 3-15).

In the year 1973, a distinctive cultural shift did take place within society. According to McHale, one could call it a 'collective nervous breakdown', caused by several events, like the Arab nations' oil embargo and Watergate (*Cambridge Introduction* 63). The literary community began to suffer from 'the inability to think historically', one of the key postmodern characteristics (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 63). A rebranding of the movement was therefore initiated. Scholars now actually started to use the term postmodernism, which invited a more precise definition, refinement of its tenor, reflection on this meaning and critique in connection to other tendencies. A discourse of theory emerged: evolution from metafictions to megafictions, deterioration of 'traditional hierarchical distinctions' between higher and lower levels of culture, cyberpunk, 'the breakthrough of procedural writing to wider audiences' and the reappearance of 'representation' in the (visual) arts after a period of 'dematerialization', are all characteristics of a better developed interpretation of postmodernism (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 61-122: 63-66, Lyotard 3-52).

After this period of self-development and culmination, it is said that postmodernism 'changed tense from past to present', on December 22, 1989 (*Cambridge Introduction* 123). This exact date is derived from an essay by Raymond Federman, and it is the day that writer Samuel Beckett died. While proposed 'in a spirit of play', with the ending of the Cold War a month before, postmodernism did in fact undergo a momentous redirection during the long nineties that followed its most important phase (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 123). Critics, such as McHale, now spoke in terms of a 'place between two deaths', an 'in-between phase of culture', an 'interregnum', 'multi-culturalism' or even 'late postmodernism' (*Cambridge Introduction* 124-125). The postmodern modes of expression were however able to capture the decade's explosiveness and newly arisen surge in technology still particularly well and can thus not be seen as the end of postmodernism, like some scholars suggested. An even bigger multiplication of alternative realities than before, ontological plurality explored through the genre of historiographic metafiction and still a lot of paradoxicality took place during this period (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 123-128).

On 9/11, or rather, in the aftermath of this yet again, fabricated boundary, the postmodern world as we knew it really did come to an end according to *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*. In 2015, McHale argued that he personally thought it might be too early to define the cultural phase that is currently succeeding postmodernism, but

speculation is certainly possible. He is personally opinionated the most useful and least inadequate term for it might indeed be post-postmodernism. In saying this, he thinks it is important to acknowledge the new phase's continuity with postmodernism, like the name already suggests. McHale emphasized that post-postmodernism is an 'intensification and mutation' rather than a break or a reversal of direction from postmodernism (*Cambridge Introduction* 177). Though we see a definite tipping point around the turn of the era, post-postmodernism is not a completely original genre but rather builds on the characteristics of postmodernism, just as postmodernism did on modernism before that (McHale, *Cambridge Introduction* 171-178).

Linda Hutcheon's book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, which was published in 1989; at the time that postmodernism was peaking, therefore serves particularly well to further define some of the key factors of the term. Hutcheon, much like McHale, also points at the fact that it is hard to define postmodernism, as any attempt to define the word will have somewhat of a double dimension. Postmodernism's distinctive character, according to her, lied in its 'commitment to doubleness, or duplicity' (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 1). Ironically, postmodernists wanted to de-naturalize society, but did this through much self-reflection; by looking at what was historically grounded they tried to change the foundation. These two opposite tendencies caused a tension that defined the paradox of postmodern texts and, in Hutcheon's opinion, simultaneously sparked its potential influence on politics (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 1-2).

Hutcheon believes that the debate concerning what postmodernism entailed, has been conducted largely in political terms, hinting at its meddling with (late) capitalism and feminism, although not everyone might agree with her on this point (Flax, Jameson 1-54). It has been frequently asserted that postmodernism is even disqualified from any political involvement because of its ironic approach, but since its representations were anything but neutral, Hutcheon finds this is an impossible stand to take (*Irony's Edge*). We might be able to agree on the fact that although postmodernism had no effective theory of agency to enable political action, it did create room for criticism due to its ideological grounding. Postmodernism's paradox, once more, lies in wanting to change the ruling doxa and, at the same time, the inescapability of the political context in which it worked. This point of confrontation, where actuality meets parody, is what Hutcheon discusses in her book as being truly postmodernist; as such, its dual nature is proven once again (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 2-10). To quote her exact words: 'Complicity always attends its critique' (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 99).

So, what was postmodernism? When we look at McHale's descriptions of the different phases of postmodernism we can arrive at the same sort of definition as in Hutcheon's book. To reiterate the previous paragraphs; postmodernism was a broad concept with different phases and a double dimension, mostly known for its excessive use of irony and deconstruction. In the mid-sixties, uncertainty about the future made its way into the idealistic society of that age, and while people latched onto historically defined structures, they simultaneously needed to ask themselves the question: what now? In the seventies and eighties, this ambivalence was answered with the decision to rebel against secured constructions, with genres like the anti-detective and the use of simulacra (Tani 35-52, Baudrillard 1-42). Then, in the nineties, a lot of mobility such as technological development took place within society. With the arrival of historiographic metafiction, a longing for certainty (by claiming onto historical events and personages) became clear. Nevertheless, through much self-reflexivity, the paradoxicality between real life and satire was still very much visible (Hutcheon, *Historiographic Metafiction* 113-129, Zurbrugg 162-163). It is this historically established structure of confusion that writers begin to explore at the beginning of the next century. They switched from criticism tucked away in literature; a feeling that nothing can be done, to interaction generated by literature; hope for the future once again. Conversation or discussion about a possible change (thereby initiating the feeling of a newfound responsibility) is what most literally can be pointed out as the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism (Peters 16-23).

Post-postmodernism

In 'Postmodern Afterthoughts', an epilogue to the 2002 edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon too, declares that, 'postmodernism is certainly finished, even passé […] Perhaps we should just say: it's over' (165-166). The question, consequently, is what would follow, or rather, what currently is. The previously given definition of postmodernism is very important in distinguishing this next trend in literature. As Irmtraud Huber points out in his book *Literature after Postmodernism* (2014), only the generations after a certain development are capable of naming and characterizing it (1-7). That is why the theory of postmodernism is quite extensively discussed in this thesis and why the next given definition of post-postmodernism should contain a certain level of reservation or room for growth. However, the term in itself should already provide some reassurance and pointers. It is said that the postmodern project of constant questioning felt endless, but post-postmodernism is here to give some answers; to move beyond that mode of duality that dominated culture for so long (Foucault, Fukuyama, Huber 1-18).

Since the turn of the century, many critics have tried to name and explain the new cultural phase that has been called post-postmodernism until this paragraph. Examples of such names are Gilles Lipovetsky's 'hypermodern times', Alan Kirby's 'digimodernism' or 'pseudo-modernism', Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's 'metamodernism', Mikhail Epstein's 'trans-postmodernism', Eric Gans' 'post-millenialism and Charles Jencks's 'critical modernism'. Between all these conceptualizations are convergences, as well as divergences, but a consistent legacy of modernist and postmodernist stylistic practices, and yet a renewed sense of consciousness, can be pointed out as the main similarity throughout all of them (Gibbons). The term post-postmodernism is generally the most often used one of all, not only because it is easy to memorize, but also because it refers to this exact essence. Post-postmodernism goes beyond the idealism of modernism and the static mode of postmodernism, but still reflects utopian, modernistic practices and a lingering postmodernist distrust.

It's almost cynical that, when the irony of postmodernism became institutionalized in society, the movement instantaneously started losing its power. But, in order to see society in a new way, different circumstances were needed. There is a reason why some critics point at McHale's third phase being the end of postmodernism. The coming of the internet changed society, but it did not in fact lead to a more critical mindset. That much-needed shift only happened in the aftermath of 9/11. Then, a true evolution took place. Terms like realism and sincerity re-appeared within the literary domain, looking beyond the postmodern endeavors to disrupt, alienate and subvert. These characteristics of post-postmodernism are still built upon those of postmodernism, but so significantly different that there is no denying that we reached a new era in literature; a stage that now desperately needs some further definition (McHale, *Cambridge introduction* 175-178, Huber 21-50, Nealon).

The stimulated dialogism of post-postmodernism, mentioned at the end of the piece on postmodernism, can be summarized as the most significant way of dealing with the feeling of being stuck in certain structures that dominated long before. The only way to grow from postmodern thinking is to understand its relativity and expand on its various described chronotopes; to talk, or in this case, to write about it (Bakhtin 84-85). As will be studied in the subsequent paragraphs (and chapters), the question is how post-postmodern theorists and writers, like Allard den Dulk, define the spatial and temporal shifts in culture, and literature more particularly, that took place in recent years. The conclusion drawn from researching Jonathan Franzen's books in connection to this, will help further define post-postmodernism either way, but if *The Corrections* and *Freedom* can give us some reassurance that a writer like Franzen is spreading a post-postmodern view on the environment, that would make this thesis

post-postmodern in itself: an exercise against the ironic reflexes and the constant self-conscious distrust of postmodernism (Den Dulk xii).

Moving on to the more specific works on post-postmodernism then, it is these two characteristics, those of 'endless irony and hyperreflexivity', that Allard den Dulk, in his study based on David Foster Wallace's, Jonathan Safran Foer's and Dave Eggers' work, points out as the main problems of Western culture in the last half of the century, and which post-postmodernism in its turn tries to overcome (1). For many individuals, these two particular aspects, or rather, postmodern tendencies, led to '(self-) alienation and loss of meaning' (Den Dulk 1-2). But writers such as Wallace, Foer and Eggers attempt to work through these problems, stating that 'a desire for sincerity, reality-commitment and community, as the elements that make us human, that can make us into human selves', can help us grow from the postmodern worldview (Den Dulk 2). Combined, these three notions are what Den Dulk describes as 'the engagement' in his subjects' novels. By diving into the philosophical dimension of the work of these writers; by viewing their novels in the light of heuristic and existentialist perspectives, he strives to attain a better understanding of the portrayal of the, to be examined, postmodern problems and, the offered, post-postmodern solutions. Insights that naturally can also be applied to the work of Jonathan Franzen afterwards (Den Dulk 1-4).

In an interview hosted by Michael Silverblatt, of KRCW's Bookworm, Den Dulk mentions that David Foster Wallace stated that the 'emptiness' or 'sadness' that came with postmodernism stemmed from a lack of principles (Den Dulk 159). Wallace, howbeit, did not call for a return to 'old truths', but instead, he mentioned in another interview, encouraged the making up of a new found morality that focuses on what it means to be a human being, or 'a self', today (Karmodi, Den Dulk 162). In his own study, Den Dulk recognizes this quest as a 'search for an existential attitude that places (renewed) emphasis on qualities such as, honesty, openness, trust and vulnerability' (162). It is a mindset of sincerity, meaning that 'the contemporary Western individual is again able to realize meaningful connections to the world and others', that lied at the center of Wallace's call (Den Dulk 162). This sincere type of position that post-postmodern writers take, is the basic virtue that allows for the other two components of post-postmodernism (reality-commitment and community) to rise as well. It is imperative to understand the precise meaning of each notion when getting to the core of what is therefore also called 'the New Sincerity' (Den Dulk 162-163).

In his chapter on sincerity, Allard den Dulk starts with a comparison of the concept of being sincere to the idea of being authentic, to underpin his exact comprehension of the word; as it is not always used correctly, and to prove why it corresponds best to his study. With the

help of the teachings of Jean-Paul Sartre, he characterizes sincerity as not for the self, but for the other, while authenticity focusses primarily on the 'I' in the story. Because of this distinction, the latter on the one hand distances him- or herself from the outside world; an excessive focus on yourself almost automatically leads to the dissolution of (meaningful) communication with others and even possibly apprehension and selfishness. Sincerity, on the other hand, forces the individual to take part in the community. It establishes a link between person and action. Possible reluctance against the concept of sincerity Den Dulk illustrates to be ungrounded. First, sincerity would imply indifference, especially regarding the self, but a wider worldview does not indirectly mean exclusivity, he argues. Second, sincerity could also lead to a stagnant version of self, because people would behave themselves according to the social order. However, in the eyes of the researcher, a promise to sincerity only leads to personal development; it is a perpetual choice of what is the right thing to do. Consciously taking responsibility for your actions does in fact obliquely lead to a constant obligation to the real world (Den Dulk 162-168).

Den Dulk's view on sincerity, as it just now appeared to be very much connected to the world and implies the need for choice, then leads him to a chapter devoted to the notion of 'reality-commitment'. Endless irony used to elude the matter of choice, leading to the disappearance of reality and eventually even of the self. As a concept build upon the philosophy of Sören Kierkegaard, reality-commitment therefore starts with choosing an 'ethical' view at life, instead of the 'aesthetic' (or postmodern) one (Den Dulk 197). This choice is based on a sense of freedom, despair and urgency. It requires you to relate the past and the future, or in Den Dulk's words: 'of becoming a self' (Den Dulk 226). The pledge to reality is also a repeated process. Repetition in a sense of a responsibility that is recurrent and transcendent. Reality-commitment has the desire to, 'reconnect language to the social sphere, or, to put it another way, to reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives' (Den Dulk 226). It is therefore supplemented with a tongue of re-engagement that portrays a plurality that simultaneously inducts the importance of community and eventually leads to post-postmodernism as such (Den Dulk 197-228).

Community, henceforth, which is defined as 'an exchange with others', is the last component to Den Dulk's retrieved solution to postmodernism (229). Taking into account the thought of Albert Camus, he discusses the importance of the other, which is claimed to be initiated by some form of revolution. David Foster Wallace once stated on this subject, that 'it is our job as responsible decent spiritual human beings to arrive at sets of principles to guide

our conduct in order to keep us from hurting ourselves and other people' (Den Dulk 230). Ergo, the remedy to postmodernism might be a type of existential engagement, as Den Dulk proposes throughout this study. It takes partly form in giving attention to, and having trust in others. To achieve a purposeful existence, connection is necessary. Meaning only arises in dialogue. A novel can thereupon be seen as a conversation between reader and writer. To refer back to Wallace once more: 'the purpose of fiction is to "reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans", to establish "a relationship between the writer's consciousness and [the reader's], and […] in order for it to be anything like a real full human relationship, [the reader]'s going to have to put in her share of the linguistic work"' (Den Dulk 260). From there on, Den Dulk concludes with the remark that books might be a 'language-game' at heart. Through purposefully demonstrating complex, human concepts such as sincerity, reality-commitment and community, Den Dulk has unfolded a blueprint for overcoming postmodernism with the use of existentialist thinking (Den Dulk 229-260: 260).

The works of Wallace, Foer and Eggers in Allard den Dulk's study, all seem to reaffirm the plausibility of bridging fictional stories to actuality. It is what sets them apart from previous inclinations in (American) literature. That what forms the base of the new movement in literary fiction, is their shared engagement with present-day Western reality. It's a foundation that has a lot from existentialist thinking, but underlines the importance of being 'out of the self', instead of existentialism's distinctive, coming 'in the world' (Den Dulk 265). Post-postmodernism's most existential characteristic is its discussed reaction to the struggles in society: the fact that these books 'address the problematic condition of contemporary existence, acknowledge it as a situation that needs to be overcome, and embody an attempt to formulate such an overcoming' (Den Dulk 265). Recognizing problems and offering possible solutions are very central to the type of literature that is being analyzed. It is here, in this fact, that we can find another continuity of post-postmodernism with postmodernism. While works of this first sort might include the enormous difficulty of certain issues in the world, just as postmodernism did, they also address ways of making life worthwhile again. Because it breaks through postmodernisms double dimension, post-postmodernism is called what it is; it moves beyond the struggles of its time (Den Dulk 264-266). And with that interpretation, it is almost time to look at its probable perspective on climate change.

To recapitulate once more, post-postmodernism's likeliness to influence the debate on the current state of our climate, stems from the fact that the state of consciousness that this movement brings forth is very critical of oneself and its actions. Caused by the reality that is presented in the novel, it tends to force the obtention of a philosophical state while reading,

tying in with its existentialist character. 'Reading a novel', Den Dulk says, 'might in some ways be regarded as a model for the realization of engagement' (266). A book can then bring up something worth thinking about, for example the issue that is our changing climate. As the story-world in post-postmodern literature is related to actual society, it reaches out to achieve actual meaning. The reader is consequently expected to put in some work, during and after its rendering. This way, post-postmodern writers initiate the possibility for change, but reader and writer must cooperate in order to develop this incentive. As such, these (early) post-postmodernist novels do not try to be utopian, but merely try to shift the ruling tide in literature. The current time might even be said to really need the virtues they bring about. Sincerity, reality-commitment and community will shine a different light on current (environmental) struggles then previous perspectives, but the question now rests what they suggest to do and how serious we, the readers, take these suggestions. As there are still some largely problematic situations, such as climate change, in place in our current reality, the solidification of such an overcoming is only just set in motion by the arrival of post-postmodernism. Now that it is apparent to what kind of conclusion a study specifically focusing on post-postmodern literature and climate change most likely would come, this thesis asks the question: will Franzen's works crystalize a part of the cultural transformation that can possibly save our planet? (Den Dulk 264-268)

Ecocriticism

Before diving into *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, in order to find out the answer to the just mentioned point at issue, some fundamental background information on ecocriticism and its relation to (post-) postmodernism is necessary as part of the theoretical framework. Some knowledge on these subjects will, but of course, provide a better understanding of the proposition of this thesis, that will thereafter be further developed in chapter 2 and 3. Consecutive paragraphs will therefore answer the following questions raised accordingly: since when do we perceive climate change as a possible problem within society? Did postmodernism discuss this development within its literature, or rather, how ecocritical was this movement? What is the current status of (post-postmodern) literature in relation to climate change as we speak? Does post-postmodernism possibly stimulate ecocriticism because of its distinctive character?

To start off, long-term averages of the weather are what we call 'climate'. Our climate has always fluctuated throughout the earth's existence, but when it diverges significantly from the standard norm, speculation about 'climate change' tends to come up. Supposition of such

has especially increased as human activities since the mid-20th century have been proven to affect our climate more than we might prefer. Also referred to as global warming, this development has long been denied or downplayed. However, in recent years, more and more people recognize the effects of human intervention on our planet and try to turn this process around, adapt to it or at least prevent it from growing any further. According to the in 1988 erected, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we see a lot more fluctuation in the weather, mainly due to the use of fossil fuel and technology, then we used to, and this has some serious consequences. Impacts might include the transformation of ecosystems, which could then lead to forced migration due to the non-livability of particular areas, and water and food supplies being at risk of contamination or diminution. As climate change is a problem that has arisen during postmodern times, ecocriticism also finds its origins during this period. But, due to the postmodern values of irony and relativism, the problems with the environment are expected to never have been taken very seriously, or extensively written about, in that same time frame (Conway, Houghton).

Climate denialism has indeed been suggested to be postmodernist (Roberts). But, to put it more accurate, that does not mean that all who deny climate change are postmodernists, but that most skeptics of climate change speak to postmodern characteristics. Without mending too much with the political aspect of this discussion, falling back on the argument discussed in connection to Hutcheon's view on postmodernism; that it has no political agency because of its nature, postmodernism does speak more to the rejection of global warming as it is not a relative event. Since postmodern knowledge is socially constructed, the fact that science shows a different perspective on our environmental circumstances is daunting and will be dismissed by its supporters. Not wanting to let go of their somewhat 'fabricated', yet stable reality is a logical consequence that postmodernists face, and the fact that climate change does not fit into this vision makes sense. Post-postmodernists, and therefore possibly Franzen, are likely to turn away from that static sentiment and call attention to the reality that is our altering environment (Roberts, Warner).

While climate change is, for reasons just stated, not a favored subject in postmodern literature, it does seem to play a significant role in more recent literary publications, for example Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or T.C. Boyle's *When the Killing's Done* (2011). As it has been recognized as an important issue by several scientific institutions over the last years, such as the IPCC and NASA, writers have picked up on the subject that is global warming as they started to revise what was historically grounded around the turn of the century. In his chapter titled 'Ecocritcism' in *Beginning Theory* (1994), Peter Barry argues that postmodernism

tended to see all kinds of binary oppositions as social-linguistic constructs. In doing so, it was skeptical about certain truths such as global warming. Ecocritics are usually more post-postmodern in the sense that they perceive the changing nature of earth as an actual phenomenon. It is thus not a postmodern matter of how we think about it. Within post-postmodernism, fact is that we affect nature and nature affects us. As such, post-postmodernism recognizes the real; it goes beyond irony, language and interpretation. To quote Barry's exact words: 'For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it' (Barry 243).

While ecocriticism has a broad scope and no exact working definition over which an agreement exists, its approach can be said to highlight references to the ecosystem with a new level of alertness. One of the first provisional descriptions of the subject, which can be found in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), captures its essence quite simply:

> What … is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty xix).

Glotfelty does, however, put a moral and political stance on the mode of analysis that is ecocriticism with this quote. Another quote that helps to pinpoint the workings of ecocriticism, comes from Richard Kerridge, found in the book *Writing the Environment* (1998):

> The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis (Kerridge 5).

The explicit eye for the multiple dimensions of nature within literature and its relation to reality, found in both citations, can be said to be very post-postmodern. Actually, 'the most sustained and influential pronouncements of the "return of the real" came from ecocriticism when it resolutely styled itself against postmodernism', according to Serpil Opperman (5). In her text

on rethinking ecocriticism, she also points out that, 'For many ecocritics, as Will Slocombe also contends, "postmodernism re-creates the world as text, destroying the world in the process"' (5). Slocombe makes a compelling point about how ecocriticism advertises itself as a 'return from linguistic "text" to referential "work" of the landscape' (Opperman 5). It is here that Jonathan Franzen comes into play. While his early novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992), appear to still be rooted in postmodernism: quoting Franzen on the first as being 'a conversation with the literary figures of my parents' generation [,] the great sixties and seventies postmoderns', both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* tend to embody a lot more social criticism (Antrim). As a writer born in 1959, Jonathan Franzen has gone through and seen the cultural changes in society personally, and responded accordingly by means of his fiction (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism*).

That being said, Jonathan Franzen is generally overlooked when it comes to his connections to both postmodernism and post-postmodernism. According to Stephen J. Burn's work on Franzen, one of the few specific studies on the author titled *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, reasons for this are his hostility towards academia and a dispute with Oprah Winfrey when *The Corrections* was chosen to be talked about in her book club. A true shame in his opinion, because Franzen's work is deeply layered and holds some interesting revelations. The focus needs to be on the novels, not the novelist, Stephen Burn states. If you see through the commotion, Franzen is in fact an important name in the (post-) postmodern debate. The writer's history and connections within the literary world are able to give a lot of insight when it comes to analyzing the shift in attitude within literature. An out-spoken character to say the least, his fervent hobby of birdwatching, a position as a research assistant at Harvard University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences and the close friendship with David Foster Wallace, are all factors that contribute to this statement (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* ix-xiv).

Burn's writing on Franzen's genealogy and the books preceding *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, are the last theoretical aspects to be discussed before the analytic part of this thesis can start. It is helpful to set the end of postmodernism out against Franzen's personal development and consider the relevance of his relationship to this literary movement aforetime a study on the post-postmodern aspects of his later work can come off well. Franzen was long preoccupied with the fiction that was produced by the generation preceding his own, resulting in *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion* (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 30). A dialogue with postmodernism can be recognized throughout his early work, and although Burn stresses that Franzen is not his books, what we know of Franzen personally, does directly or

indirectly play a part in the development of his writing and his relationship with the literary movement(s) at discussion (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 32).

Jonathan Franzen

Jonathan Earl Franzen was born on August 17, 1959, in Western Springs, Illinois. He grew up in a suburb of St. Louis. With two older brothers, he remembers his youth to be pretty much like that of an only child. In like manner, he was an outsider at school. Feeling somewhat lonely, Franzen turned to writing. College was especially stimulating for his development as a young writer. He studied German and took part in several extracurricular activities to do with journalism. Expressing strong social critique in the first years of his academic career, he only turned to fiction later in the course of his schooling. Franzen began writing his first novel in 1982, after finishing his studies and having been abroad (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 33-40). Being an author is, however, not a career he would recommend to anyone else. In a conversation with Jonathan Green, at the Athenaeum Theatre in Melbourne, Franzen expressed that it is no profession to strive towards, but because he grew up in a competitive family, he had no other choice then to become a writer:

> I was competitive and it just it came to my attention pretty early on that I was better at writing than I was at any other subject at school, and so I thought, "Well, why would I not choose the thing I'm best at?" But also, I just became sad. I'd been damaged the way any person who spends their life reading books was damaged – which is to say, in the best of ways. I had found – during the dark years of junior high school, when I had a few friends, but not many, and was not a social success – a community that welcomed me in books, and quickly reached the point where I couldn't live without reading. They're very, very complimentary and similar things, reading and writing. They're a way of being alone and also connecting, or trying to connect (Green).

Thus, because of the power he discovered in books, Jonathan Franzen decided to write his first novel. *The Twenty-Seventh City* got published in 1988, and was a story about the life of a family from his hometown of St. Louis, unraveling under the pressures of their time that were politics and finance. It was his initial attempt 'to calling out his generation' (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 39). The book *Strong Motion*, that came out four years later, also focuses on a misfunctioning household and had the same goal in mind. Within the latter work, Franzen uses

an interesting concept: tectonic events symbolize the troubles that hit the family named 'the Hollands'. As Franzen put it himself, 'I imagined static lives being disrupted from without—literally shaken. I imagined violent scenes that would strip away the veneer and get people shouting angry moral truths at each other' (Burn, *The Art of Fiction*). His *Strong Motion*-characters use the two opposing systems of religion and science to make sense of the world. It is an element very typical of Franzen, this 'fusing opposites', according to Burn. But in this kind of duplicity, also referred to as 'system novels', these first two works of Franzen were still very postmodern in the way they viewed society (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* xi).

The contradictory component that Burn points out in connotation to *Strong Motion* is actually significant to most of Franzen's writing, or rather even to his person in general. Franzen's feelings towards with his early fiction being categorized as postmodern, or for committing to any literary movement for that matter, are very ambiguous. He often criticizes academics, but also searches for recognition from a 'higher' audience. Intertextuality, list making, and 'temporal form' are all examples of the dichotomy that is Franzen's fiction. In his non-fiction, the writer always resolves the issue at stake, yet in his fictional work he seems to evolve from postmodern inflection to merely wanting to entertain the reader with his writing (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 28-31). This development can be explained by means of Franzen's lifecycle. When writing *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, he got to spend a lot of time on these projects due to his position as a research assistant at Harvard and his partner Valerie Cornell, who is also an author. When Franzen's fairly new marriage with her started to show some cracks, and he and his wife were not able to solve their problems by moving around, Franzen arrived at a very hard period in his life. He began teaching for a bit, but it did not fit into his lifestyle as a writer and so, half-way during the nineties, he decided to return to journalism (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 42-45).

Writing articles for, amongst others, *The New Yorker*, *Harper* and *New York Times Magazine*, made Franzen engage more directly with culture again. He had isolated himself in his initial endeavors to write great fiction. Crucial reintegration is what followed next, just as Franzen began writing *The Corrections*. The 'fault-finding postmodern author' got replaced with a storyteller (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 48). As Burn explains it, this is not a switch from literary to popular, 'but might be more accurately classified with the awkward titles: academically-privileged formalist postmodernism versus story-based literature that aims to entertain the reader' (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 48). Although Franzen does borrow a lot 'from the toolbox of the conventional novel', he does still link these elements with some aspects of postmodernism (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 49). A complexity that goes

beyond the suggestions of his non-fiction, showing that ‘its unresolved divisions between realism and postmodern formalism negotiates [Franzen] his relation to his literary ancestors and charts the possibility of an emergent post-postmodernism’ (Burn, *At the End of Postmodernism* 51).

David Foster Wallace once described the possible ‘aesthetic sea-change’ he discovered in American fiction as follows:

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal". To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows (Wallace 192-193).

While Jonathan Franzen has no problem to talk about what is wrong with our society that is driven by consumption in interviews and to write about the ills of our dependence on technology in his essays, the rules in his works of fiction are proven to be different (Renner). As his novels are less outspoken, of concern is whether Franzen will still be able to convey a message of much needed change and live up to Wallace’s expectations with *The Corrections* and *Freedom*? While his first two books appeared to be still fixed in postmodern rules, at most only touching upon the problems of their time, but not initiating any change, will *The Corrections* and *Freedom* be any different?

To come to a well-rounded conclusion of the essence of such questions proposed in this thesis up until this point, being if either Franzen’s *The Corrections* and/or *Freedom* are able to

set in motion the change post-postmodernism embodies, in particular when it comes to climate change, chapter 2 and 3 will each contain a section providing some crucial context, followed by three subheadings consisting of a summary of the story, an analysis of the post-postmodern aspects it quite possibly contains and a detailed depiction of the direct references to nature. If the sincere mindset that Allard den Dulk talked about can be discovered in these respective works, what does that say about what Jonathan Franzen, might suggest our attitude towards the environment needs to be? Does he explicitly say so, either through his characters or outside of the text, or do the virtues of sincerity, community and reality-commitment present in the novels, tell us enough about the future of the nature he so dearly loves to observe? And what does Franzen's opinion mean in connection to post-postmodernism more in general? By means of a thematical analysis, the answers to these questions should emerge from the stories itself and the way they are written.

Chapter 2 *The Corrections*

In the April issue of *Harper's Magazine*, 1996, a literary essay often referred to as 'the *Harper's* essay' got published. Jonathan Franzen, who had returned to journalism by this time, wrote the piece in order to explain why one should still read in the age of technological development that was the nineties. As he got in touch with society again, he noticed that reading was getting out of fashion and the novels produced were often not of a standard to his liking. First published under the title 'Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels', the article was later retitled 'Why Bother?' and published in Franzen's collection of essays called *How to Be Alone* (2002). The essay is a great introduction to the space of mind that Franzen was in when writing *The Corrections*. While the title of his next book might already give away its main ambition, the context in which it was written is important in understanding its full message. It is therefore that this chapter starts off with the opening lines of the *Harper's* essay:

> My despair about the American novel began in the winter of 1991, when I fled to Yaddo, the artists' colony in upstate New York, to write the last two chapters of my second book. My wife and I had recently separated, and I was leading a life of self-enforced solitude in New York City, working long days in a small white room, packing up ten years' worth of communal property, and taking nighttime walks on avenues where Russian, Hindi, Korean, and Spanish were spoken in equal measure. Even deep in my Queens neighborhood, however, news could reach me through my TV set and my Times subscription. The country was preparing for war ecstatically, with rhetoric supplied by George Bush: "Vital issues of principle are at stake." In Bush's eighty-nine-percent approval rating, as in the near-total absence of public skepticism about the war, the United States seemed to me hopelessly unmoored from reality — dreaming of glory in the massacre of faceless Iraqis, dreaming of infinite oil for hour-long commutes, dreaming of exemption from the rules of history. And so I, too, was dreaming of escape. I wanted to hide from America. But when I got to Yaddo and realized that it was no haven — the Times came there daily, and my fellow colonists kept talking about Patriot missiles and yellow ribbons — I began to think that what I really needed was a monastery (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 55-56).

In the first paragraph of this much discussed work of non-fiction, Franzen is able to capture quite an evident description of the way he interpreted and experienced American society to be in 1991. The way he felt about the world is relevant, because it was Franzen's motivation for writing *The Corrections*. As the text continues, he mentions Paula Fox's novel *Desperate Characters* (1970). It grasped a 'sense of cultural crisis', that Fox apparently already registered when she wrote the book in the late sixties (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 58). Twenty years passing have only confirmed that she was right, says Franzen. At the time of writing the *Harper's* essay, he was 'succumbing, as a novelist, to despair about the possibility of connecting the personal and the social' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 58). The problem was, that what was the crux of society at that time, was not depicted in the novel as a genre, and likewise, the media did not portray much affection with fiction either. To quote Franzen on *Desperate Characters* once more: 'What Sophie and Otto were glimpsing, in the vatic black mess on their bedroom wall, was the disintegration of the very notion of a literary character. Small wonder they were desperate. It was still the sixties, and they had no idea what had hit them' (*How to Be Alone* 58-59). Describing postmodernism as such, some years after Sophie and Otto's endeavors, Jonathan Franzen set out on a quest to write 'an uncompromising novel', or rather, a post-postmodern novel that would correct the postmodern tendencies he noticed and disliked in literature (*How to Be Alone* 59). His first attempt, however, was not quite as successful as he would have hoped. *The Twenty Seventh City* was supposed to be a 'culturally engaged novel', but unfortunately failed 'to engage with culture' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 61).

His second book, *Strong Motion*, got about the same results as the previous one, despite the fact that Franzen had 'come out throwing rhetorical Molotov cocktails', 'instead of sending […] bombs in a Jiffy-Pak mailer of irony and understatement' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 62-63). The next book that Franzen was going to write would therefore not be 'just any third novel' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 64). Franzen seemed determined to produce the non-negotiable piece that he set out to write in the first place. But for years, Franzen was paralyzed by a society that was ruled by instant social coverage and consumerism. 'The work of transparency and beauty and obliqueness that I wanted to write was getting bloated with issues' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 65). The depressed man that Franzen was after his divorce, desperately needed an epiphany. On page 94 of the essay, in the year 1996, a long-awaited realization finally hit him:

> How could I have thought that I needed to cure myself in order to fit into the "real" world? I didn't need curing, and the world didn't, either; the only thing that did need curing was my understanding of my place in it. Without that understanding —

> without a sense of belonging to the real world — it was impossible to thrive in an imagined one (Franzen, *How to Be Alone*).

Not soon after Franzen figured out that he did not have to follow mainstream culture, but could free himself from the masses by merely connecting to them, he also got a letter from novelist Don DeLillo, which gave him even more hope. He belonged again, to the world that was so foreign to him for so long, by realizing that he could represent this feeling in his writing. He took the advice of the writer of *White Noise* (1985), because in the words of DeLillo, 'the writer leads, he doesn't follow' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 95). Thus, Franzen drafted a story that would correct the idea of the novel depicted in the *Harper's* essay. To be specific, he was, yet again, going to write on a family from the Midwest, but they would be a symbol for the big picture; for current culture and where Franzen thought that needed to go. As Robert Rebein suggested in an essay titled 'Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said "No" to Po-Mo', the essay 'Why Bother?' marked a turning point in Franzen's style. He went from a postmodernist to a realist as he started working on *The Corrections* again (201-221).

Summary

The Corrections is thus, in essence, a book about a family of five from the fictional, traditional Midwestern town of St. Jude. Following the lives of mother Enid, father Alfred and their three grown-up children Chip, Gary and Denise, during the last years of the twentieth century, the main plot is whether Enid will be able to get the all Lamberts back to their hometown for one last Christmas together. Woven into this question, that eludes throughout the whole novel, are the storylines of the individual characters and a deeper layer of meaning. Before entering this third space, a concise summary of the events happening in *The Corrections* will be given to later serve as context, essential to its correct interpretation. The novel was very well received, not only because of its intricate unfolding, receiving several prizes amongst which the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction and a nomination for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize, but mostly because its special feature lies in its description of a post 9/11 civilization, which is remarkable since it was published ten days prior to the attacks (Aronstein). Its reception is taken into account, because the acknowledgement *The Corrections* got affects its possible influence on society.

The narrative starts with Enid and Alfred Lambert at home is St. Jude. Their offspring has moved to the East Coast. As they transitioned into adulthood, Gary, Denise and Chip all left their deep rooted and aging parents to take care of themselves. Alfred used to work as a

railroad engineer, but the stringent man and dad he used to be is slowly replaced by a forgetful and instable elder, due to his dementia and Parkinson. Enid, who used to be under his rigid spell, is acting out. She is sad though, to see her children not live the lives she imagined they would be. Gary, the oldest, works and lives in Philadelphia with his family; spouse and three sons. His wife seems quite harsh, not wanting to spend Christmas at her in-laws and denying Gary's worsening depression. The youngest, Denise, also lives in 'Philly'. She works as a chef, but her personal life is a mess. She got divorced and has an affair with her boss' wife. Chip used to have an academic career in teaching at a university in New York, but got fired after having intercourse with one of his students. He tries to write a screenplay, but when that also doesn't work out, he takes a job as a defrauder in Lithuania. While Alfred's condition worsens over the course of the unfolding of their personal dramas, the Lambert family is, at last, reunited on Christmas morning. Though throughout the novel, they have been constantly and desperately trying to improve their individual situations, due to an age of constant development, the book ends on a positive note. Alfred's health is not savable, but the rest of the household is able to turn their lives around (Franzen, *The Corrections*).

The title of the book, *The Corrections*, refers to a number of developments, amongst which are the adjustments that the remaining family members exercise towards the ending. Chip enters a more serious phase in his life by moving, marrying and having twins, Denise also finds a more stable situation working in a new restaurant and Enid feels good about the change her children are going through, having accepted Alfred's situation. Only Gary does not find true salvation. Furthermore, the title is a direct reference to the weakening of the economic growth that was fostered by technology and a tribute to William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955) (Franzen, *Mr. Difficult*). Moreover, *The Corrections* might also be interpreted as a solution to the problem Franzen faced in the *Harper's* essay. The Independent wrote in its review on *The Corrections* that: 'It is said that Franzen sat down and wrote an article about why contemporary fiction was failing, concluded that the problem was that it did not engage with the small corridors of character as well as the landscape of social trends, and then wrote *The Corrections* as an answer to his own criticism' (Walter). In any manner, all of these corrections, interpreted in a way of adjustment, are what makes Franzen's third novel seem like a turn towards post-postmodernism.

The Independent review contains a strong suggestion in the same direction. It is significant that its reviews implicate that *The Corrections* portrays an important shift in literature, as this attention enhances the impact the book was able to have on society. Asking herself the question, 'What do we want from a novel these days?', Natasha Walter initiates a

conversation on the whole point of fiction, rather than discussing just the book itself. She defends this striking proposition by stating that *The Corrections* has come as an answer. 'It has been touted as the kind of novel we are all waiting for, a novel that straddles high and low literature, that is richly complex and easily readable, that takes in family life and the big international picture' (Walter). As most articles on *The Corrections*, whether stemming from journalism or scientific, agree on the fact that the award-winning text asks its reader to consider if the novel has taken a turn in a new direction, the question remains how it does that. A piece in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, reads: 'Franzen's desire to write a social novel has required, it seems, an engagement with the contexts and conditions of a globalizing world' (Annesley 112). Ty Hawkins, in an essay on Franzen's first three novels, even goes so far in saying that the book is 'a culmination and a point of departure—a triumphant leap forward for Franzen's own fiction and for American fiction more generally, insofar as the novel embodies Franzen's imperatives for the future of the genre' (61).

Like stated, as early as 1996, it was Franzen who started a debate on the future of the novel with the *Harper's* essay. He explained the difficulty he had with contemporary works not displaying minorities against the background of mass culture and although he taught, for a while, that society might even move too fast to do so, he found a way to rectify this feeling. As soon as Franzen recognized that while one novel cannot bear all that is supposedly 'wrong' with the world, he also realized that it can contain some transformative writing about its wrongdoings, as a way to pinpoint societal problems step by step. 'To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?' (Franzen, *How to Be Alone* 49) And with that thought in mind, he wrote *The Corrections*. Now that it is clear why Franzen wrote *The Corrections* and what the title implies, what rests is an analysis of what details then exactly make this book seem to enter a new phase in literature. To come back to the theory discussed in the first chapter: what elements of the engagement are found in *The Corrections*, or even, what might not be so post-postmodern about supposed Franzen's literary shift after all? With an eye open for nods towards the objective of this thesis, or possibly yet, explicit references towards the environment, the indication that *The Corrections* indeed hints at an important change in tone, set out in this first part of the chapter, will either be (partly) confirmed or invalidated with textual evidence.

Analysis

While the larger part of *The Corrections* might actually be said to contain some typical postmodern characteristics, to the extent that all characters find themselves struggling with

situations where there is no solution seen on the horizon and use irony and denial to fight this feeling of failure, there's an all-defining moment near the end of the book that changes its whole course. It's the event that most critics probably refer to when they write about its life-altering character and why it got so much recognition. Although every single member of the Lambert family only seems to care about themselves until page 647 of the book, it is the patriarch's slow decline that initiates a gradual transformation in each of them that cannot be turned around. The point in time that secures this change in direction, is already eluded to, halfway throughout the novel, when Sylvia, a woman from the cruise that Enid and Alfred are on, talks about pulling herself out of her misery after her daughter's death:

> And when the event, the big change in your life, is simply an insight—isn't that a strange thing? That absolutely nothing changes except that you see things differently and you're less fearful and less anxious and generally stronger as a result: isn't it amazing that a completely invisible thing in your head can feel realer than anything you've experienced before? You see things more clearly and you know that you're seeing them more clearly. And it comes to you that this is what it means to love life, this is all anybody who talks seriously about God is ever talking about. Moments like this (Franzen, *The Corrections* 350-351).

The moment Sylvia describes, is maybe not a specific instant for the Lamberts, but rather a process, coinciding with the economic decline that was dominating society at the time of writing. As the last chapter, also titled 'The Corrections', describes: '*The correction*, when it finally came, was not an overnight bursting of a bubble but a much more gentle letdown, a year-long leakage of value from key financial markets, a contraction too gradual to generate headlines and too predictable to seriously hurt anybody but fools and the working poor' (Franzen, *The Corrections* 647). This development was, however, the wake-up call that initiated the all-important values of post-postmodernism to arise within the text. The deterioration of their family, simultaneous to a definite plunge in monetary resources, is what makes Denise, Enid, Chip, and even Gary in a sense, finally look at their situation with a larger perspective. Sincerity, in the way that they all start paying attention to the other, snowballed into a transition from constant denial to facing reality and from a focus on the self to an eye for their family.

Consequently, Chip realizes that he can no longer run away from his responsibilities; may it be with a student, a new writing project or a job in another country, Denise recognizes that her affairs will not get her anywhere and even Gary goes against the tirades of his wife.

The children all returning to St. Jude on Christmas morning is what solidifies their shift. The closing paragraphs of the novel possibly confirm the profound alteration that took place the most, as Enid decides to speak to Alfred about his past behavior. 'How wrong to have been so negative, how wrong to have been so gloomy, how wrong to have run away from life, how wrong to have said no, again and again, instead of yes', she says (Franzen, *The Corrections* 653). As times succumbs near the ending of the book, the narrator states that Alfred started to refuse to eat after being in a care home for two years and he eventually passes away. With his death, Enid 'felt that nothing could kill her hope now' (Franzen, *The Corrections* 653). 'She was seventy-five and she was going to make some changes in her life', is the line that Franzen chose to close his third book with (*The Corrections* 653).

The Environment

Counting over six hundred pages, *The Corrections* contains many elaborate descriptions of the mood that lingers in the air just before the turn of the century; the definite change that has just been pointed out in its main characters or the post 9/11 period as we, the reader, got to know it. The large number of sketches puts emphasis on the idea that these references might even be more important than the overall story. His audience learns a lot about what probably coincides with Franzen's personal worldview through his extensive characterizations. It has to be said that there might be a discrepancy between what the writer actually finds and what he writes down on paper, which is why the term 'implied author' is used in this context. However, the sarcasm with which he tends to write, points out Franzen has at least some problems with culturally established norms. It is in these details, that we can also find some information on the writer's individual outlook on the environment. Subtle implications are spread throughout the book, such as Alfred waging a war against plastic: 'the forces of plastic were winning. Alfred had seen jam and jelly jars with plastic lids. Cars with plastic roofs' (Franzen, *The Corrections* 312). Another example is the discussion on the greenhouse effect and holes in the ozone layer that lasts a few pages while on the cruise (Franzen, *The Corrections* 375). One quote concerning climate change, however, stands out among the rest, sounding:

> The human species was given dominion over the earth and took the opportunity to exterminate other species and warm the atmosphere and generally ruin things in its own image, but it paid this price for its privileges: that the finite and specific animal body of this species contained a brain capable of conceiving the infinite and wishing to be infinite itself (Franzen, *The Corrections* 536-537).

In this scene, Alfred is overthinking his somber fate of dying, due to the diseases he was diagnosed with, and lashes out at humankind. Despite the fact that the quote is said in a moment of utter despair, the reader might wonder what truth there is to it. And it is not just this quote that makes one think critically of the civilization built. When we meet Gary for example, after stating that he has been worrying a lot about his mental health, Franzen writes: 'Although in general Gary applauded the modern trend toward individual self-management of retirement funds and long-distance calling plans and private-schooling options, he was less than thrilled to be given responsibility for his own personal brain chemistry, especially when certain people in his life, notably his father, refused to take any such responsibility' (Franzen, *The Corrections* 159). Such a sentence certainly questions the structures humanity has established within our current culture. While specific attention towards the environment is kept at a minimum, Franzen unquestionably asks the reader to reevaluate explicit values that are rooted within our system.

With the help of his characters and their stories, Franzen does seem to state his own issues with current society, as they match with statements in several interviews. But even within the confines of *The Corrections*, as a post-postmodernist he is able to pinpoint various difficulties with society, as they are, broadly taken, one and the same with his personal view. This statement is similar for the Lamberts. While they might be a particular family written about in a novel, they can also be interpreted as a symbol for their societal counterparts. In his analysis of *The Corrections*, James Annesley puts it as follows:

> Franzen does more […] than simply project his characters onto a backdrop drawn from general views of contemporary society. Offering precise descriptions of a world shaped by international politics, new technologies, consumer economics, and the free market, he sets out instead to link his portrait of the Lambert family with a vision of globalization's complex combination of forces. The familial and the domestic are thus known in relation to broader panoramas of global change. It is this approach that leads Susanne Rohr to read *The Corrections* as "a new form to the genre of the novel: the novel of globalization" (111-112).

The Corrections is thus a book of double layers: of personal and common, of actual and symbolic and of postmodernism and post-postmodernism. In his review, Thomas R. Edwards stated that: 'The One Important Novelist worth reading in 2001 has to be Jonathan Franzen' (75). The article, titled *Oprah's Choice*, categorizes the book not so much as a stylistic wonder, but, yet again an opposite tendency, as both entertaining and socially engaging. Franzen might

have outdone himself by being chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club, instead of the negative connotation he initially had with it (being a chick-lit group). While 'closely associated with highbrow fiction because of a 1996 essay in *Harper's* magazine about the challenge of writing sophisticated, socially engaged novels, in which he seemed sometimes to dismiss the possibility of a popular audience for serious fiction', Franzen produced what he himself thought that could not be done (Edwards 75). One could even argue that he corrected himself by writing a culturally engaging novel that spoke to the masses. With that said, anticipation for his next novel grew big over the nine years it took Franzen to write it. Yet again concerning a Midwestern couple and their kids, the fact that the father of this family is a fervent environmentalist might tell a little more than *The Corrections* did when it came to the environment. Now that Franzen executed the necessary modifications to his own literature, but possibly also to literature as a whole, is *'Freedom'* what will follow?

Chapter 3 *Freedom*

In the Sunday Book Review of *The New York Times*, Sam Tanenhaus almost naturally started his analysis of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* with a comparison to *The Corrections*. The books are, then again, very similar. Moreover, if Franzen would be able to capture the post-postmodern ambition he set out with *The Corrections*, he could exercise a lot of influence with this next novel. As such, the reviews of *Freedom* are quite important in establishing its impact. According to Tanenhaus, with *Freedom*, Franzen was indeed able to capture the mood of its time once more. Benjamin Secher of *The Telegraph* even desecribed it as 'the first Great American Novel of the post-Obama era', just as *The Corrections* was that of the post 9/11 period. Tanenhaus continued his article with the statement that, '"The Corrections" towered out of the rubble, at once a monument to a world destroyed and a beacon lighting the way for a new kind of novel that might break the suffocating grip of postmodernism.' In his opinion, *The Corrections* revised the one dimensionality of the postmodern novel up until then, making way for *Freedom*. Poetically put, 'Franzen cracked open the opaque shell of postmodernism, tweezed out its tangled circuitry and inserted in its place the warm, beating heart of an authentic humanism' (Tanenhaus). But did *Freedom* actually end up being the realist novel that you would expect to follow after a book like *The Corrections*? On that proposition, the opinions appear to be divided.

Clearly, Tanenhaus was a big fan of the book. He ended his review with the words that, 'Like all great novels, "Freedom" does not just tell an engrossing story. It illuminates, through the steady radiance of its author's profound moral intelligence, the world we thought we knew' (Tanenhaus). Several other reviews were very enthusiastic. Jonathan Jones, of *The Guardian*, called Franzen 'a literary genius' and believed his fourth novel stood on 'a different plane from other contemporary fiction.' *The New York Times*'s Michiko Kakutani called it a 'compelling biography of a dysfunctional family and an indelible portrait of our times.' All these critics seem to agree on the idea that *Freedom* was the post-postmodern dialogue they anticipated after the success of *The Corrections*. The broadcasted review of the National Public Radio confirms this perception by saying that, 'Like The Corrections, Freedom celebrates and extends the possibilities of the good old realist novel — at a time when realism is out of fashion, even in autobiography. Franzen makes us skeptical post-moderns believe again, if only for a space, that literature really can and should hold a mirror up to the world' (Corrigan).

On the other side, however, there is a significant group of reviewers that does not agree with the interpretation that *Freedom* lived up to its expectations. *HuffPost* was especially critical, concluding that the book was written too realistically and therefore felt forced. Harsh

lines, such as, ‘Thus Franzen has decidedly turned away from vision, instruction, illumination, invention, imagination, style, verbal flair, and conviction in favor of workmanlike pure description—or what his narrow conception of realism holds as description’, sounded throughout the *HuffPost* review (Shivani). The main critique from the opposite camp was that Franzen went too far and yet not far enough. He wrote about a similar family as in *The Corrections,* but Franzen’s new characters supposedly felt far-fetched at times. In the *New York Daily News*, Alexander Nazaryan wrote that he thought Franzen was serious when he said he was ‘being doomed as a novelist never to do anything but stories of Midwestern families.’ *The Washington Post* was also disappointed, commenting that is missed ‘the wit’ that *The Corrections* did have (Charles).

Why is it that these reviews, but the same goes for scholarly articles, seem so divided on the subject of *Freedom*? In order to do right by the complexity of the book, partly caused by its high expectations, an analysis of the individual aspects that suggest or deny *Freedom*’s solidification of post-postmodernism will follow. After a reasonably concise synopsis, *Freedom* will be pulled apart in order to find out if Franzen was able to complete the venture he started over a decade ago with the *Harper’s* essay. According to Anis Shivani of *HuffPost*, ‘Realism always has the tendency to devolve into cliché, in its eagerness to depict the average; it is when we move beyond realism that we typically get monumental characters able to get their arms around the defining problems of the day.’ A turn towards realness will unfortunately always be covered by ambiguity; that is what also seems to have happened to *Freedom* going of its initial reception. The question thus rests if Franzen’s descriptions can, however, evolve in some form of ‘transcendent criticism’ as post-postmodernism would need them to (Shivani)? And is the narrative, as such, able to do anything for our diminishing environment?

Summary

The story of *Freedom* is about the lives of the members of the Berglund family. Patty and Walter have two children, Joey and Jessica, and live in St. Paul, Minnesota. Richard Katz, a ‘rockstar’ and college friend of Walter, also plays an important role in its entirety. The unraveling of Patty’s and Walter’s marriage, the main focal point of the text, is embedded with sidesteps to the past, future, and mostly to their son Joey’s endeavors. The book is basically divided up into five parts: ‘Good Neighbors’, ‘Mistakes Were Made (Part I)’, ‘2004’, ‘Mistakes Were Made (Part II)’, and ‘Canterbridge Estates Lake’. The first portion of the novel opens with a portrait of the household illustrated by their neighbors. The reader learns that Patty and Walter are the first people in a while, to move to St. Paul. The ‘gentrifiers’ are reasonable wealthy and liberals.

The mother stays at home to take care of the children, while dad works as an environmental lawyer. The twenty somewhat pages that 'Good Neighbors' counts, are full of piercing descriptions of the life, middle-class individuals live at the beginning of the century: typical Franzen. Eventually, after Joey and Jessica have gone off to college, unhappy Patty and Walter decide to move to Washington D.C., concluding that their life did not unfold quite as they had planned it to (Franzen, *Freedom* 3-26).

The subtitle of the second section reads 'Autobiography of Patty Berglund, by Patty Berglund (Composed at Her Therapist's Suggestion)' (Franzen, *Freedom* 27). The 150 pages long case of mise en abyme explains why Patty is who she is. By delving into her own history, Patty tries to interpret the woman she has become. Patty comes from a good home: her parents are in politics and her sisters very artsy. Patty, however, is the odd one out. She is a great basketball player which gets her a varsity scholarship and a chance to run away from the people that call her being date-raped, by the son of friends of mom and dad, so to speak 'inconvenient'. At the University of Minnesota, Patty meets her new best friend and groupie Eliza, musician Richard Katz and his roommate Walter Berglund. Patty has an eye for Richard, but it is Walter who eventually wins her over with his persistence. While the two end up raising a family together, Patty keeps a weak spot for Richard. She eventually even has a short-lived affair with him at Walter's holiday house, situated on a lake with no name, during the earlier years of her marriage (Franzen, *Freedom* 29-187).

In '2004', focalization switches to and between Walter, Joey and Richard. This way the reader gets yet another perspective(s). Richard has become a successful rocker due to an album he produced after his time with Patty. Sadly, he does not cope well with fame. Walter, now living in D.C. with Patty, is in sketchy business with a trust that is using the creation of a reserve for the cerulean warbler, as an excuse for coal mining. Meanwhile, Walter is hoping he can get some of their funding for his own project, as he believes that the cause behind all problems with the environment is overpopulation. Richard and Walter reconnect during this time, as Walter hopes Richard can also help him with his plan to stop younger generations from reproducing so much. Furthermore, Walter's assistant Lalitha seems totally in love with the man whose marriage is slowly falling apart. While closing the deal on the protected area for the songbird, Walter and Lalitha kiss. Richard turns out to be willing to lend a hand to project Free Space, but this is partly because of Patty. When he tries to convince Patty that they should be together, she lets him read her autobiography in order to prove her love for Walter. Richard, most probably in a last attempt of desperation, leaves the document for Walter to read. Walter is not

happy. After all that he has done for her, Patty betrayed him. He therefore decides to throw her out (Franzen, *Freedom* 191-503).

At the same time, during the year 2004, Joey is in college. He is not happy either. His years in Minnesota were much more exciting than his time at university. Joey had a romance with the neighbor's daughter back in St. Paul. Her name was Connie and they even lived together at Connie's mother's place for a while, much to the annoyance of Patty. Due to his roommate Jonathan, Joey gets into politics and meets Jonathan's sister Jenna. As he maneuvers between two worlds, Joey decides to get involved with a man that tries to profit from the Iraqi war. He needs money to invest and turns to Connie for her college fund. The two impulsively marry, Joey gets the money, but his head is still with Jenna. After an awkward situation with the supposed girl of his dreams, Joey however discovers that he does truly love Connie. He puts his attention on the lucrative deal that requires him to find spare parts for old trucks. He does find the parts, but they are insufficient. Unfortunately, Joey signed a contract and really has no other choice than to send them off. It earns him a lot of money and a lot of guilt as well. After confessing his crimes to his father, it eventually brings them closer together. Walter is now happily together with Lalitha, despite being fired because of an angry speech he made on television. Luckily, the Free Space campaign did get a lot of attention because of that same situation. Yet as they are preparing for its main event, Lalitha gets killed in a car crash (Franzen, *Freedom* 191-503).

A second part to Patty's autobiography interrupts the story. At the time of writing, Patty has not spoken to Walter in six years. Richard and herself did not last long. She spent a lot of time with family because her father got sick. After his dead, she negotiated the inheritance with her sisters. It brought them closer together again. She now lives in NYC, working as a teacher. She tells the reader that Joey has turned his life around and Jessica is a publisher. The siblings also rekindled after their parents' split. It is Richard who encouraged Patty to write this piece, in hopes of getting back together with Walter. Then, in the last part of the book, it becomes clear that Walter decided to live in his mother's lakeside condo after the loss of Lalitha. He spends his days protecting the birds at, what is now called, Canterbridge Estates Lake. He is initially not interested in reading Patty's 'apology', but when she visits him, they do reunite at last. The book thus has a happy ending, with Walter and Patty moving back to New York, where their children are, and turning the cottage into a bird sanctuary to commemorate Lalitha (Franzen, *Freedom* 507-562).

Analysis

As it might have not become clear from this summary, some bits of Patty's autobiography, but especially Walter's thoughts on the environment, are often long monologues that continue for pages on end. In her article, '*Freedom*'s Limits: Jonathan Franzen, the Realist Novel, and the Problem of Growth', Margaret Hunt Gram points out that the duration of these 'speeches' are often at the essence of reviewers their main negative remark. It is an important observation that Gram here makes, stating:

> There exists a certain formal incongruity between the parts of *Freedom* that touch upon overpopulation and the parts that touch upon other totalizing political problems, from sexual violence to the nightmare of imperial war. *Freedom* reaches these other problems by emplotting them, by having its characters encounter them as experiences or dilemmas, just as *The Corrections* (2001) has its characters negotiate globalization and the neuropsychiatric economy. Unsustainable population growth, in contrast, arrives in Freedom not as part of the story but via passages of monologue or dialogue or thought, each characterized by a kind of discursive excess or overflow (295-296).

Gram is opinionated that Jonathan Franzen went overboard by not incorporating Walter's ideas on population growth well into the story. She argues that by not following the 'formal mechanisms' of literary realism, Franzen missed the point he so desperately wanted to make, at least when it comes to climate change (Gram 296). His passion for the environment, and for wildlife in particular, together with the high expectations that *The Corrections* raised, made him break the 'cardinal Lukácsian rule "No didacticism"' (Gram 296).

While the novel's aim is to remind the reader 'how to live' in this day and age, as its characters so often repeat, Walter's problem with the growth of the population seems to interrupt this often subtle goal (Franzen, *Freedom* 26, 318, 319, 336, 557, Gram 300). While economic growth, for example, is woven into *Freedom*'s plot, the rapid replication of the human species is too present to (not only) Gram's liking (308). 'Politics require narrative', she says (Gram 311). But there is a reason that Franzen possibly finds it hard to incorporate his ideas on reproducing: 'the problem is invisible' (Gram 311). While all the other forms of 'freedom' discussed in the novel, have some type of logic to them, repercussions concerning the number of children you have, only seem to restrict human rights (Gram 310-311). While environmental issues are all the more bound up in the post-postmodern values Den Dulk pointed out (sincerity,

reality-commitment and community), the literary movement likely has problems expressing these concerns surrounding nature because of that very fact. Attempts of such sort will quickly look desperate or loud, as Gram demonstrates throughout her article.

A good comparison is Joey's role in the free-market economy. Joey works for a fictional company named Restore Iraqi Secular Enterprise Now, or RISEN, that tries to profit from the war in Iraq by turning what once was a state-controlled industry into a private one (Gram 307). Joey's task is to deliver parts for old trucks, but all he finds are broken pieces. Walter's and Patty's son, however, signed a contract saying that he would get the bits to Iraq in any way. The business venture therefore takes places despite this issue, and through Joey's guilt, possible problems with warfare, our current economy and its push for economic growth are highlighted. Another conversation between father and child, on this same subject, does the same. When Joey tells Walter about the details of his new job, Walter gets angry at him for participating in such a sketchy enterprise, emphasizing the negative side-effects of Joey's work while also putting into perspective its dual nature:

> "What's not to understand?" his father said. "This is a war for politics and profit. Period!"
> "Just because you don't like people's politics," Joey said, "it doesn't mean that everything they do is wrong. You're pretending that everything they do is bad, you're hoping they're going to fail at everything, because you hate their politics. You don't even want to hear about the good things that are happening."
> "*There are no good things happening*."
> "Oh, right. It's a black-and-white world. We're all bad and you're all good."
> "You think the way the world works is that Middle Eastern kids the same age as you are getting their heads and their legs blown off so you can make a ton of money? That's the perfect world you live in?"
> "Obviously not, Dad. Would you stop being stupid for a second? People are getting killed over there because their economy is fucked up. We're trying to fix their economy, OK?" (Franzen, *Freedom* 403)

While the conversation does get heated, Walter's and Joey's, the implied author's and even post-postmodernists their political views are cleverly netted within this debate and a bigger web of storylines.

Contrary to this example, Walter's opinion on mountaintop removal, in a discussion with Patty, feels almost forced in the direction of overpopulation. Patty remarks, after reading the *Times* that morning, that she read an article on Walter's warbler and how bad mountaintop removal is for it. It annoys Walter that Patty simply comments that, 'although he probably knows best', 'mountaintop removal does sound fairly horrible' (Franzen, *Freedom* 322). Walter therefore bursts into a tirade on the catastrophe humankind is heading for:

> "I meant that world population and energy consumption are going to have to fall drastically at some point. We're way past sustainable even now. Once the collapse comes, there's going to be a window of opportunity for ecosystems to recover, but only if there's any nature left. So the big question is how much of the planet gets destroyed before the collapse. Do we completely use it up, and cut down every tree and sterilize every ocean, and then collapse? Or are there going to be some unwrecked strongholds that survive?" (323)

The exchange feels unnatural as it does not lead anywhere, but to the reoccurring idea that human reproduction is the problem of everything going wrong with our climate. After a three-page dialogue, Franzen puts an abrupt stop to it by writing that 'Walter ended the conversation before it could take an even worse turn' (Franzen, *Freedom* 324).

The Environment

At various times throughout the novel, the notion that the environment is mainly suffering because of the amount of people living on this earth, is laid on so thick, that it gets a political character. While such an attitude is indeed engaging, and thus seems to tend to post-postmodernism, it loses its effect by being emphasized as much. The attention overpopulation gets, doesn't feel sincere in the manner that Allard den Dulk described the term. In similar ways, this technique used by Franzen, of explicitly naming and explaining the term, loses its link with reality and its connection to the world, by being so particular. The following quote might help to illustrate this matter even more:

> I guess I was part of a larger cultural shift that was happening in the eighties and nineties. Overpopulation was definitely part of the public conversation in the seventies, with Paul Ehrlich, and the Club of Rome, and ZPG. And then suddenly it was gone. Became just unmentionable. Part of it was the Green Revolution—you

> know, still plenty of famines, but not apocalyptic ones. And then population control got a terrible name politically. Totalitarian China with its one-child policy, Indira Gandhi doing forced sterilizations, American ZPG getting painted as nativist and racist (Franzen, *Freedom* 213-217).

There are a lot of details tucked into these six sentences that as a matter of fact do not subscribe to the feeling that post-postmodernism is meant to bring about. But has Franzen's project then failed because of the urgency he felt when it comes to climate change? Or were the critics on Tanenhaus' side correct in not judging his passion too hard; in seeing the big picture and the heartfelt essence of this possible flaw?

At a certain point in the novel, Franzen does venture out from the form of realism he uses when it comes to the environment; the one Gram so strongly dislikes. A 'small but strangely moving foray', woven into a small storyline that starts on page 485, sounds as follows (Gram 312):

> 'It was the season of migration, of flight and song and sex. Down in the neotropics, where diversity was as great as anywhere on earth, a few hundred bird species grew restless and left behind the several thousand other species, many of them close taxonomic relatives, that were content to stay put and crowdedly coexist and reproduce at their tropical leisure. Among the hundreds of South American tanager species, exactly four took off for the United States, risking the disasters of travel for the bounty of things to eat and places to nest in temperate woods in summer. Cerulean warblers winged their way up along the coasts of Mexico and Texas and fanned into the hardwoods of Appalachia and the Ozarks. Ruby-throated hummingbirds fattened themselves on the flowers of Veracruz and flew eight hundred miles across the Gulf, burning up half their body weight, and landed in Galveston to catch their breath. Terns came up from one subarctic to the other, swifts took airborne naps and never landed, song-filled thrushes waited for a southern wind and then flew nonstop for twelve hours, traversing whole states in a night. High-rises and power lines and wind turbines and cellphone towers and road traffic mowed down millions of migrants, but millions more made it through, many of them returning to the very same tree they'd nested in the year before, the same ridgeline or wetland they'd been fledged on, and there, if they were male, began to sing. Each year, they arrived to find more of their former homes paved over for

> parking lots or highways, or logged over for pallet wood, or developed into subdivisions, or stripped bare for oil drilling or coal mining, or fragmented for shopping centers, or plowed under for ethanol production, or miscellaneously denatured for ski runs and bike trails and golf courses. Migrants exhausted by their five-thousand-mile journey competed with earlier arrivals for the remaining scraps of territory; they searched in vain for a mate, they gave up on nesting and subsisted without breeding, they were killed for sport by free-roaming cats. But the United States was still a rich and relatively young country, and pockets full of bird life could still be found if you went looking (Franzen, *Freedom* 485-486).

In this quotation, 'a set of species struggling to survive in the context of unrestrained human growth' is illustrated without its immediate purpose oozing from the text (Gram 312). Moreover, it resembles some lines from the founding text of ecocriticism. In *Silent Spring,* birds also play an important role in pointing out the wrongdoings of human population. 'On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh' (Carson 22). It might not be a coincident that birds are a good indicator of the quality of habitat. A disbalance in bird population or diversity is often a sign that the ecosystem is degrading.

Explained thematically as such, the critique that *Freedom* got, now makes sense. With such high suspense for being the exemplary post-postmodern novel that *The Corrections* had eluded to, its negative and critical reactions were needed to put *Freedom* in its place. Franzen did manage to abide to its characteristics of sincerity, reality-commitment and community on the grand scale of things, although this might not have gotten the reached it strived for. Difficulties with, amongst others, warfare, social media and diseases were all delicately plotted into the story. Even the imperfection of Walter's strong opinion on overpopulation is post-postmodern in its nature. *Freedom* illustrated that the intricate problems of its characters were not insurmountable, and that although the problem of our climate might feel like that, it is not yet too late to take action. 'The United States was still a rich and relatively young country, and pockets full of bird life could still be found if you went looking', is the last sentence of Franzen's truly post-postmodern attempt to save the environment. The problem of overpopulation might have largely been described with the postmodern modes of irony and skepticism, which makes sense as post-postmodernism is still in development, but this one passage does give hope for the future. A post-postmodern perspective that is quite conceivably able to stop climate change

is eluding through the work of Jonathan Franzen, and with his example, it's only a matter of time before others will follow.

Conclusion

This thesis took writer Jonathan Franzen's novels *The Corrections* and *Freedom* as the test cases that would likely be able to demonstrate the transition from postmodernism to post-postmodernism and to indicate what this development would mean for the urgent matter of climate change that our planet is currently facing. As a problem that arose during that first mentioned literary movement full of irony and relativism, the main question was whether post-postmodernism is manifesting itself in contemporary literature through characteristics such as sincerity, reality-commitment and community, and what the presence of such values signifies for the diminishing of nature on earth. Franzen's first attempts at writing a novel that would initiate social change were still very much rooted in the duality of postmodernism. But, because of the turbulent years of the nineties, both personally as well as more generally, a perspective coinciding with that of post-postmodernism slowly started to exhibit Franzen's literature. Moreover, ecocriticism also began to really root itself due to the emergence of these new thoughts within society. Although we might only be in the initial stage of this reframing genre, because of the fact that post-postmodernisms specific character lies in pointing out the problems within society, to which ecocriticism is quite closely connected, this thesis presumed that if a post-postmodern attitude could be discovered throughout the books at discussion, this would also be a positive force when it comes the issue of global warming.

The reason for this statement stems from the idea that post-postmodern literature is able to connect to fiction and reality. While postmodern literature had no effective agency to initiate change, its successor can, especially if read by a large audience. *The Corrections* was the work that, indeed, secured a shift in Franzen's style, got a lot of attention and with that, set the tone for his next novel, *Freedom*. However, *The Corrections* did not do as much for our environment, by not changing the way we think about it, as it did pointing out the problems of our consumer economy and addiction to media, as well as securing a more general conversion in mindset. While still also containing some typical features of postmodernism, critics were unanimous in their shared opinion that *The Corrections* was one of the first works of fiction that displayed a turn towards what Allard den Dulk called the 'engagement'. And even though this necessary alteration in tone did not specifically address climate change, it did question the doings of humanity at that point in time. The post 9/11 novel, that was even published before this transformative event, set the bar high for Franzen's fourth book. *Freedom* was received quite well, but not with the same enthusiasm as *The Corrections*, causing its possible influence to diminish as well. Definitely post-postmodern, it missed the nuance that the previous work

had when it came to the strongly environmentally aware character that was Walter. As read through the lengthy descriptions on environmental problems, Franzen appeared to have a hard time expressing the seriousness of overpopulation with a realist approach, likely because there might not be any time for subtleness when it comes to this matter. However, he did not fail completely by emphasizing the importance of attention for climate change so much. While Franzen was still navigating the correct way to approach this topic, the themes of sincerity and symbolism resonating throughout both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* did become an example for other writers.

The conclusion of this thesis is therefore that, while it is hard to measure whether *The Corrections* and *Freedom* initiate any form of change when it comes to the environment, they do promote the attitude of sincerity of post-postmodernism and therefore contribute to the awareness surrounding climate change as well as other problems in society. Such an ending judgement makes sense as the movement is still in development and novels their social change will always be indirect, also dependent on critical attention. In saying that, however, the discovery of its main aspects throughout literature like that of Jonathan Franzen, their particular nature and post-postmodernism's close connectedness to ecocriticism, tends more to a confirmation of an upcoming revolution than mere pragmatism. Not only is research such as this thesis needed to make sure that a different perspective within literature is identified, but just like the books discussed, this thesis is giving attention to important matters within society; it is in itself an exercise against postmodern tendencies. It's now the readers turn: the reader of Jonathan Franzen's books, the reader of this thesis and the reader of other post-postmodern works, to develop the incentive given; to face the realities described in these works of art. Because if post-postmodernism does not inspire to save the planet, there will be no place to even practice this newfound sincerity.

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