

## Conceptual Avant-Garde Writing in Contemporary Flanders: Evelin Brosi's *Thuis* (2020)

Lars Bernaerts

### Abstract

Evelin Brosi's novel *Thuis* (*Home*, 2020) collects all the plot summaries of the Flemish soap series that goes by the same name from 1995 to 2020. What may seem to be a gimmick at first sight, is in fact an intervention that reevaluates contemporary culture as well as the avant-garde traditions of ready mades and uncreative writing. In this article, the former will be examined against the backdrop of Demeyer & Vitse's (2021) argument about the topos of the house and belonging in contemporary novels. The latter will be elaborated in a close reading of the novel through the lens of the theory of the avant-garde and conceptual or uncreative writing (Goldsmith 2011, Broqua 2013). The article argues that *Thuis* pursues the contemporary reflection on home and homeliness, creates a critical distance from the claims about Flemish identity and belonging, and revitalizes avant-gardist thought about originality, authorship, and the everyday. As such the case study broadens our view of contemporary fiction and of the reception of the avant-garde in the Low Countries.

### Keywords

neo-avant-garde, ready made, conceptual writing, uncreative writing, Flemish identity, the everyday

### Biographical Note

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### Introduction

In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, Evelin Brosi published the novel *Thuis* (*Home* or *At Home*), which consists of the summaries of the Flemish soap series by the same name. Brosi puts all these existing texts together in one book. Both the soap series and the novel evoke and problematise feelings of belonging and homeliness. Even though the novel does not refer to covid, its reception cannot be disconnected from that context. All over the world, people were rediscovering and renegotiating the meaning of being at home. Suddenly, the familiar space of the house became a topos of both safety and threat: home is where you would have to stay to avoid infection but home is also where you are confined and isolated. In that way, the pandemic gave a new twist to a process that was already going on: the cultural meaning of 'house' and 'home' is shifting. 'Homeliness' ('huiselijkheid') has become a value that is expected from and projected onto a range of contexts such as hospitals, office spaces, shopping malls, and coffee bars. At the same time the house is increasingly considered as the best place to offer care e.g.

when someone gives birth, recovers from illness or is dying. In other words, societal institutions become more homely. Conversely, home is the antithesis of the institution, while at the same time home itself can be appropriated by institutional processes (one can think of home office).

Recent literary fiction, too, turns its attention the significance of the home. When Hans Demeyer & Sven Vitse construct an in-depth profile of the contemporary novel in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*, they devote a chapter to the topic. Their study traces the ‘affective focus’ in novels of the millennial generation, which surfaces in themes of ‘attachment, connection, lack, and desire’ (‘hechting, verbindend, gemis en verlangen’).<sup>1</sup> As Demeyer & Vitse demonstrate, the house is an important motif in contemporary fiction, around which reflections upon belonging and identity pivot, for example in Jeroen Theunissen’s *De omwegen* (2013), Nina Polak’s *We zullen niet te pletter staan* (2014), Lucas Rijneveld’s *De avond is ongemak* (2018) and Maartje Wortel’s *Dennie is een star* (2019). In these novels, characters long for a home (Rijneveld, Wortel) or return home (Polak, Theunissen), emphasising that the house is the site of primary attachment and ideological formation.<sup>2</sup> Demeyer & Vitse argue that this revaluation of ‘home’ should be understood in the context of sociological and ideological developments. In the twenty-first century, housing is an increasingly politicised topic and it is predominantly approached in economic terms, while the house is also an object of affective ties for an individual subject.<sup>3</sup>

Evelin Brosi’s *Thuis* can be read as an intervention in these debates, as we will see, but it also helps to consider the book’s avant-gardist strategy. The novel is a piece of neo-avant-garde appropriation art. While the book is a funny gimmick on one level, it is worth while taking this book seriously, not just as an object but also as a text. In particular, it can be understood as conceptual or uncreative writing based on the revitalization of an avant-garde strategy. In the tradition of Marcel Duchamp’s ready made *Fountain* (1917), *Thuis* recontextualises found materials, adding only a minor artistic gesture with great consequences. Duchamp tilts the object and signs it with the pseudonym R. Mutt; *Thuis* brings all the available summaries together in a book that has the pseudonym of its creator on it. Through that continuation of an avant-garde shock tactics, the book performs and invites reflection not only on general notions of authorship, appropriation and originality, but also on cultural identity and the meaning of ‘home’ in Flemish culture. In this article, I argue that Brosi’s *Thuis* can be read as a

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<sup>1</sup> Demeyer & Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Demeyer & Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 15-18; 215-256.

<sup>3</sup> Demeyer & Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 220.

revitalization of the avant-garde as well as a comment upon contemporary fiction, in which ‘longing for home’ and ‘belonging’ are central notions.

### ***Thuis* (1995-) and Flemish Identity**

The publication of *Thuis* was not prompted by the covid crisis but rather by the anniversary of the soap opera. In 2020, the series celebrated its 25th anniversary. The novel can be seen as a tribute to this milestone, celebrating as well as scrutinising the soap opera. While Brosi’s *Thuis* is experimental on the level of discourse, its storyworld and story content – i.e. the events, characters, and settings represented by the discourse – coincide with that of the soap series. The soap opera centers on locations, happenings, and characters that have become at least vaguely familiar to anyone growing up in Flanders since 1995. The dramatised daily interactions and relationships between the characters unfold in private spaces like living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens, as well as in the semi-private and public settings of typical small and local businesses, such as a hair salon, the plumber’s company Sanitechniek, the Bed & Breakfast Zus & Zo, or the restaurant and hotel Ter Smissen. As the conventions of the genre dictate, the daily and trivial interactions between characters are alternated with unlikely and spectacular events: in 25 years the characters are involved in an incredible amount of abductions, poisonings, rapes, attempted murders, suicide attempts, and car crashes. In the show’s settings, dialogues, characters, and events there is a claim of social realism,<sup>4</sup> emerging from the dialogues, body language, habits, clothing, food, interiors and exteriors of houses. However, it is a realism in melodramatic overdrive.

In order to understand the book’s intervention in contemporary fiction and the neo-avant-garde, it is relevant to consider of the cultural significance of the soap opera. First, most people in Flanders know about the series and it is part of everyday life: not only is it domestic fiction about daily lives, it is also *embedded in* Flemish domestic life. It is part of the daily lives of Flemish people either because they watch it on a daily basis, because it is playing in the background, because others tell them about developments in the show, or because the soap is referenced in popular culture and public discourse. For many people, the soap opera is part and parcel of their own feeling of being at home, even a feeling of belonging, and it is part of a daily routine.

Second, it is broadcast by the Flemish public service and has the rhetorical claim of being inclusive and being representative of Flemish culture<sup>5</sup> and of Flemish diversity. As

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<sup>4</sup> See Dhoest, ‘The National Everyday’, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Dhoest, ‘Multi-ethnic Imagined Community’.

Alexander Dhoest points out, the soap opera gravitates towards ‘normality and common sense’ and ‘creates a symbolic home for the nation, situated in everyday culture and restricted by the limits of normality’.<sup>6</sup> It also tackles topical social issues such as same-sex marriage, adoption, ethnic diversity, and gender transition. Discussing these issues in the context of a soap series, however, makes them ‘consumable’ rather than stimulating ideological and political position-taking. What is more, as Hannelie Marx Knoetze has argued in an article on the politics of belonging in *Thuis*, being Flemish is still constructed in a homogenous way, from a privileged perspective of whiteness as a hegemonic ideology.<sup>7</sup> Her reading already questions the nature of ‘home’ in the series. Also, irrespective of the attention paid to contemporary social concerns, the soap opera is devoid of political comments, and lacks awareness of national or global political, economical or ecological shifts. Again, it is social realism to a limited extent. Even though its locations are Flemish, there are hardly any references to particular Belgian towns or cities. The spatial reference frame of the story remains vague but recognizable as Flemish following the logic of a simulacrum: there is no actual location or Flemishness to which this image refers although it pretends to refer to such a reality.

### **Brosi’s *Thuis* as Avant-Garde**

The novel *Thuis* consists of the synopses or plot summaries that originally appeared in online and offline TV guides. Brosi put them together without any changes to the text. Along with so-called recap sequences, such brief summaries – usually one to three sentences long – are the narrative threshold content of television shows. Along with the trailer, they are what I would call skeletal narration, containing key elements of a longer story, without narrative exposition, causal explanation or psychological motivation. This leads to a staccato narrative discourse such as, in the case of *Thuis*, ‘Tim is angry with Sam. Peggy hears a strange noise at night in the Zus & Zo. Lowie’s farewell party generates emotions. Marianne makes her complaints to Eddy. Nancy can enjoy a pleasant afternoon.’<sup>8</sup> Unlike the recap sequence or trailer, the plot summary is textual in nature and leads an unnoticed life as a distinct genre, even though this type of text is omnipresent today, for example on streaming platforms. Bringing all these short texts together, the book defamiliarises a discourse that is so familiar that it is not so much read as merely seen and consumed.

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<sup>6</sup> Dhoest, ‘The National Everyday’, 66-67. Dhoest refers to the work of David Morley.

<sup>7</sup> Marx Knoetze, ‘Who Feels at Home?’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Tim is kwaad op Sam. Peggy hoort ’s nachts vreemde geluiden in de Zus & Zo. Het afscheidsfeestje van Lowie brengt emoties met zich mee. Marianne doet haar beklag bij Eddy. Nancy kan genieten van een leuke namiddag.’ (Brosi, *Thuis*, 341).

The transposition that leads to this defamiliarization, from the soap opera and its summaries to the book, can be understood as a remediation and recontextualization. While the plot synopses originally serve solely in relation to the audiovisual content, the novel is an emphatically textual medium (in which the visual dimension plays a minor role). Without the original audiovisual context, it is challenging to make sense of the plot summaries. For the reader who has not seen previous episodes, the summaries do not give sufficient information to reconstruct all the events and their significance for the characters. This is a crucial point: whereas the soap opera excels at predictability and recognizability, which is the domain of the everyday, the book is so full of *Leerstellen* that it resembles experimental fiction: ‘Rosa advises Peggy to look out for help’,<sup>9</sup> but for what reason? ‘Tibo wants to test Lynn’,<sup>10</sup> but we do not know where, when, how and why. The shallowness of the actions and events comes to stand out in these chunky sentences. In that way, the radically familiar *but deceptively* familiar nature of the soap opera is remediated into a defamiliarising work of literature, that is sobering and even shocking in its image of Flemish homeliness.

What supports the recontextualization is a shift in the field of cultural production. *Thuis* is a mainstream television show for a mass audience on the Flemish public broadcasting service and written by a ‘collective’ of screenwriters that remains more or less anonymous. Brosi’s *Thuis* is published by het balanseer, a small publisher of experimental and avant-gardist literature. The reading audience is small and dedicated. This entails a shift from lower to higher autonomy, and from lower to higher cultural capital and a higher degree of specific consecration, if we look at it from the perspective of Bourdieu’s theory.<sup>11</sup> The effect of such a shift can again be subsumed under the category of shock.

The notion of a shock aesthetics is not introduced here by way of exaggeration. The book inscribes itself in the avant-garde tradition of the ready made that capitalises on the recipients’ shock experience. In such a response, they turn away from interpretation as the easy projection of familiar meaning. According to Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, shock is the aim of the avant-garde, as a means to stimulate the recipient ‘to change one’s conduct of life; it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient’s life praxis’.<sup>12</sup> Bürger hints at his central (much-criticised) hypothesis that the avant-garde fights the autonomy of the arts by reconciling art and life. Although this

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Rosa raadt Peggy aan om hulp te zoeken’ (*Thuis*, 277).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Tibo wil Lynn eens testen’ (*Thuis*, 277).

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, ‘The Field of Cultural Production’.

<sup>12</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80.

view does not hold for the avant-gardes in general,<sup>13</sup> it is certainly valuable as a frame for the ready made as it uploads everyday objects with aesthetic value. There is no contradiction here with Bourdieu's views: the avant-garde *intention* of effacing the boundary between art and life does not preclude the avant-garde autonomous position in the literary field.<sup>14</sup>

The shock tactics appropriated from the dadaist ready made is also highlighted by the book design of *Thuis*. The book has a size, shape, and colour similar to that of a brick (see Fig. 1), an analogy reinforced by the design of the book's spine (see Fig. 2). The fact that the spine shows a brick wall in turn creates a further analogy with the lay-out of the text: since there are no paragraph or chapter breaks, the page lay-out is massive as a brick wall (see Fig. 3), with interspacing as its cement. What emerges from this analogy, is the idea that the book consists of abstract, interchangeable patterns (see below).<sup>15</sup> The analogy between brick and book also emphasises the book's status as a ready made, as an object as if it were drawn directly from reality. In this case, of course, the process is more complex: the soap opera is part of daily life for many people, but the text also refers to a fictional world.

In combination with the title, the design would imply that this book is a building block of belonging or homeliness. Home also has the connotation of the everyday, which is important here: it is the place you return to on a daily basis and a place where a lot of the most ordinary, quotidian activities take place: brushing your teeth, having breakfast, watching television... and indeed: watching a soap opera. That brick wall of moving images, voices and sounds is a familiar part of Flemish homes.

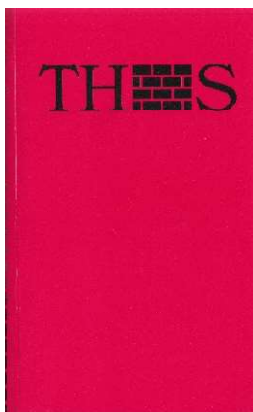


Fig. 1: Book cover of *Thuis* (2020)

<sup>13</sup> See Scheunemann, 'From Collage to the Multiple', 18-21.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, there are historical alliances between the avant-garde and the field of politics, in which this autonomy is suppressed (see Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production', 325)

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, this puts the book into dialogue with Marcel Broodthaers's 1969 appropriation of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1887), in which the artist covers the words of the poet with black bars.



Fig. 2: Book spine of *Thuis* (2020)

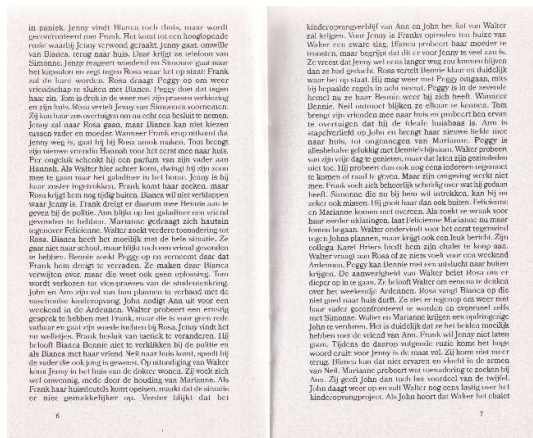


Fig. 3: Page lay-out of *Thuis* (2020)

## Unoriginal Genius?

In its emphasis on the everyday, Brosi's appropriation of the soap opera engages in an interesting dialogue not just with the ready made but also with the tradition of uncreative writing, in which daily discourse is repurposed. Uncreative or conceptual writing is characterised by textual methods of citation, verbatim reporting, transcription, recycling, and appropriation. In *Unoriginal Genius* (2010), the avant-garde theorist Marjorie Perloff puts the practice of uncreative writing in the broader context of contemporary poetry which departs from conventional notions of originality through the use of constraint-based and citational methods. She traces the practice back to concretism (as in Ernst Jandl's poetry), Oulipo and translational poetics (e.g. exophonic poetry). In the context of Dutch literature, one can think of instances of found text in the literary magazine *Barbarber*, for example.

Perloff proposes to actually ‘read’ the ‘unreadable’ uncreative writing of Kenneth Goldsmith and takes his collection of New York traffic reports seriously as ‘a book about traffic’.<sup>16</sup> In the same vein, it is worth while reading *Thuis* as a book not just about uncreativity and the avant-garde, but also about home and the everyday. What is more, the two are interconnected. Andrew Epstein<sup>17</sup> has argued that uncreative writing is not just a ‘response to the crisis of originality and authorship brought on by the evolution of new media’, it is also a ‘powerful way of paying close attention to the nature of everyday life in modernity’.<sup>18</sup> The American poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith is the exponent of this approach. His 600 page *Soliloquy* (1997) collects the language uttered by the poet during an entire week and in *Day* (2003) he transcribes an edition of the *New York Times*. Both projects foreground concepts of the everyday – the so-called ordinary language we consume and produce on a daily basis and which differs from so-called literary language. Vincent Broqua, a scholar of American poetry, connects Goldsmith’s projects to the aesthetics of verbatim transcriptions or verbatim copies, calling it a poetics of extreme literality. In their estranging evocation of daily life, these writings resist notions of expressivity but insist upon the value of language as matter.<sup>19</sup>

Goldsmith is not a stranger to the author of *Thuis*. Critics such as Ewoud Goethals and Laurent De Martelaer have already commented upon Brosi’s affinity with the American poet and his concept of uncreative writing. Brosi published a transcription of a lecture by Goldsmith in 2017 and called it a remake. Like Goldsmith, Brosi considers himself as a word processor. He is like Borges’ Pierre Menard in the age of new media, copying and pasting all the plot summaries of *Thuis*.<sup>20</sup> In his artistic practice too, Brosi does not position himself as a literary author. Evelin Brosi is one of several pseudonyms of Boris Van den Eynden. As a graphic designer he is known as Oliver Ibsen. Both pseudonyms are anagrams of the first names of Van den Eynden and his colleague Lieven Van Speybroeck. Van den Eynden is active in several disciplines: graphic design, performance, installation art, anti-art, and music. Together with his counterpart, he did an anti-art exhibiton in 2019 in the Antwerp Museum for Contemporary Art, the MHKA, while a Marcel Broodthaers exhibition was running in the museum. Evelin Brosi and Elvis Bonier urged visitors to leave the museum and to go and find contemporary art elsewhere. As a word processor Brosi published 3968, in which each word and the punctuation

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<sup>16</sup> Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Epstein, ‘Found Poetry, “Uncreative Writing,” and the Art of Appropriation’ and *Attention Equals Life*.

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, ‘Found Poetry, “Uncreative Writing,” and the Art of Appropriation’, 314.

<sup>19</sup> Broqua, *À partir de rien*, 90-92.

<sup>20</sup> See the interview with De Martelaer (‘Evelin Brosi: 34650 seconden / 3968’).



of Orwell's novel *1984* are duplicated. On Ubuweb<sup>21</sup> one can listen to his project *34650 Seconds* (2017), a stereophonic sound poem containing all the possible combinations of the letters of the word Mississippi.

In his review of *Thuis*, Goethals characterises Brosi as a 'glaneur', someone who creates art from garbage and other materials that are left or thrown away. Assembling the plot summaries, the book is like an archive, Goethals adds, an 'uncanny archive of the self-image of Flanders, an archive of the absurd'.<sup>22</sup> In an interview,<sup>23</sup> Boris Van den Eynde supports this idea of archival absurdism, asserting that he never saw any episode of the soap opera and still he was familiar with it, mostly through the plot synopses in newspapers. He labels his book as an *Entwicklungsroman*, i.e. a type of Bildungsroman. While the genre attribution may seem overtly absurd, it is neither nonsensical nor non-serious. The novel is full of characters and full of developments even to the point that the succession of emotions and actions matters more than the actual aboutness of those emotions and actions. It is an *Entwicklungsroman* not in the sense that it is about characters growing up and shaping their identities, but in the sense that it is all about developments. Yet, precisely in that sense the narrativity of the novel is quite unconventional. The following section sheds some light on those stylistic and narrative peculiarities, which undergird the book's affinity with the avant-garde and its reflection upon homeliness.

### Uncreative Language

What happens when we take not just the object and performance of *Thuis* but also the text seriously? Reading the first sentences of the novel allows us to get a better grasp of the use of language and the narrativity in the book:

Een avondje uit in de disco heeft voor Peggy Verbeeck minder prettige gevolgen. Ze voelt zich ziek omdat ze een XTC-pil heeft genomen. Haar vriend Benni Detaeye had daar op aan gedrongen. Frank Bomans probeert komaf te maken met zijn zoveelste minnares, Simonne Backx. Hij slaagt erin zijn relatie geheim te houden voor Jenny, maar niet voor zijn dochter Bianca. Bij dr. De Decker staat zoon Tom onverwachts weer voor de deur. Zijn zus Ann is daar niet zo mee opgezet. En vader Walter eigenlijk ook

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ubu.com/sound/brosi.html>

<sup>22</sup> 'je waart rond *unheimlich* archief van Vlaanderens zelfbeeld, een archief van het absurde' (Goethals, 'Een archief van het absurde')

<sup>23</sup> 'Schrijver bundelt 25 jaar "Thuis" in boek zonder één aflevering te zien: "Dat interesseert me allemaal niet"' *Het Nieuwsblad*, 26 December 2020.

niet. Peggy weigert te verklappen van wie ze de pillen gekregen heeft. Maar Bianca zegt het uiteindelijk wel. De volgende dag is er bij Rosa ingebroken Bennie is de eerste verdachte en Rosa verbiedt Peggy nog langer met hem om te gaan. Walter lijkt toch erg veel aandacht te hebben voor Rosa. Zij houdt de boot af. Walter zorgt er voor dat Tom een baan krijgt. Dat bevalt Tom niet en hij zoekt een alternatief om aan geld te geraken.

An evening at the disco has rather unpleasant consequences for Peggy Verbeeck. She feels ill because she took an XTC pill. Her friend Bennie Detaeye had insisted on it. Frank Bomans tries to distance himself from yet another lover, Simonne Backx. He manages to keep his relationship a secret for Jenny, but not for his daughter Bianca. At dr. De Decker's place, the son Tom turns up unexpectedly. His sister Ann is not happy about it. And neither is the father, Walter, actually. Peggy refuses to disclose where she got the pills. But Bianca eventually tells. The following day there was a burglary at Rosa's place. Bennie is the first suspect and Rosa forbids Peggy to see him. Walter seems to pay a lot of attention to Rosa. She keeps her distance. Walter finds Tom a new job. Tom does not appreciate it and he looks for an alternative to make money.<sup>24</sup>

Presenting a striking instability in a storyworld, the first sentence does what narrative fiction tends to do in its opening.<sup>25</sup> Instead of fleshing out Peggy's experience, however, the text immediately resolves some of the curiosity in the next sentences in an almost business-like manner. Moreover, it abruptly moves away from the two characters and introduces a new set of characters and instabilities (Frank's adultery, Ann's dislike for her brother). As in the soap opera, several storylines are juxtaposed here, each with their own dynamics of tension and resolution. They are interwoven through character relations (such as family ties) and settings (such as Rosa's hair salon). With regard to narrativity and narrative progression, the synopses give us the facade of suspense, surprise and curiosity, without much ground or resolution. Clearly, the text presupposes our curiosity, suspense, and surprise,<sup>26</sup> but we do not know why we should be curious, in suspense, or surprised. We read sentences such as 'Frank realises he's gone too far'<sup>27</sup> or 'Peggy takes action',<sup>28</sup> or a characteristic sequence such as 'Femke confesses

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<sup>24</sup> Brosi, *Thuis*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> See Phelan, 'On First Lines'.

<sup>26</sup> In Meir Sternberg's approach to narrativity, these are the three types of narrative interest emerging from a text's organization of informational gaps (between what the audience, the narrator, and the characters know).

<sup>27</sup> Brosi, *Thuis*, 277.

<sup>28</sup> Brosi, *Thuis*, 349.

everything to Ann. Marianne made a decision. Peggy gets bad news from Ann. Franky puts Femke in her place.’<sup>29</sup> Yet: what does Femke confess, what is Marianne’s decision about, what is the bad news and why is Femke reproved? The text does not provide enough information to fill the gaps, so that the presupposed readerly reactions – such as indignation, wonder, excitement – remain hollow or simply unrealised as well.

The novel’s temporality contributes to the same image. The time of the novel is a compressed time, as it summarises story developments and the scenes of the television versions.<sup>30</sup> There is a strong temporal cyclicity in the recurrence of holidays, birthdays, but also in relationships, marriage and adultery, or the rise and fall of small businesses. Because of the minimal narrative presentation, these cyclical and narrative patterns become abstract, which puts the reader at a distance from the represented everyday. Brosi’s verbatim transcription has an effect similar to that of Goldsmith’s projects. In Broqua’s words: ‘this literalist practice that seems to reject originality and to want to present itself as ordinary as possible, plays out a reversal that makes the ordinary strange’.<sup>31</sup>

The narrative space remains sketchy as well. The fact that a novel called *Thuis* contains so few elements of spatialization is salient. What the ‘house’ or ‘home’ is remains unspecified. Locations are mentioned only now and then, but they are never described. The implication is that the settings are so familiar that they do not need any explanation. From the perspective of the plot summary this makes perfect sense, but in the context of the novel the effect gains additional meaning. We can relate it to a phenomenological view of the ‘home’ as the place where everything is familiar, a spatial environment that is not perceived as such because of this radical familiarity.

The narrator, too, is an abstract instance. It strangely resembles an impartial omniscient narrator of nineteenth-century realism in some respects, as it switches from one scene, setting, character constellation to another and relies on external signs rather than characters’ interiority. Yet, the narrator remains covert throughout the novel, avoiding explicit judgement or narrative commentary. That degree of invisibility makes the narrational mediation quite unusual. One could read the narrator as an algorithm producing variations on a limited amount of patterns. The text presents a catalogue of such permutations involving characters, actions (including speech acts), and emotions. X receives a phone call from Y, X threatens Y to reveal the truth,

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Femke bekent alles aan Ann. Marianne heeft een besluit genomen. Peggy krijgt slecht nieuws van Ann. Franky zet Femke op haar plaats.’ (Brosi, *Thuis*, 289)

<sup>30</sup> In addition, it compresses tv productions over a period of 25 years.

<sup>31</sup> ‘cette pratique littéraliste qui semblait rejeter l’originalité et vouloir se faire la plus ordinaire possible, se joue un renversement qui rend l’ordinaire étranger’ (Broqua, *À partir de rien*, 91).

X is mad at Y and so on. A template such as ‘X has good/bad news for Y’ recurs again and again in the novel. The same goes for the many marriages, birthdays, surgeries, and burglaries. In other words, the text reads as a list that could simply go on and on. As a consequence, it invites readers to abandon a mode of close reading usually associated with literary fiction, and adopt a reading strategy of skim reading, a mode of reading attuned to audiovisual and digital media.

All of this aligns with the earlier mentioned shock tactics of the book. What we encounter here is the ‘uninspired’ writing of texts for consumption. In their original context they are designed to avoid drawing too much attention, providing some narrative information but not too much, and to cater for an audience that already knows the characters. In view of their algorithmic and abstract quality, these summaries are themselves uncreative narratives. It is the skeleton without the flesh, and the skeleton shows the trivial narrative infrastructure of the soap opera. Put together in a book, however, these synopses generate effects of defamiliarization, boredom, and shock, which contrast in remarkable ways with the suspense, excitement, and emotional involvement associated with the soap opera.

The uncreativity of Brosi’s *Thuis* goes hand in hand with a revelation of the uncreative nature of the summaries, and of the narrative, in that way evoking the burden and boredom of being at home. We can extend this analysis to the level of style and language. The language is full of linguistic common places, for instance in the description of emotions:

Jenny kan haar gevoelens niet meer de baas. (125)

Jenny can no longer control her feelings.

Eric is helemaal van de kaart. (185)

Eric is totally upset.

Peggy gaat haar hart luchten bij Geert. (264)

Peggy pours out her heart to Geert.

Franky kan z’n gevoelens niet langer verbergen. (265)

Franky can no longer hide his feelings.

If creative writing is the discourse in which daily as well as unusual emotions are made tangible and plausible through the measured deployment of style, then this must be *uncreative* writing.

In other words, Brosi's project reflects, underscores, and suggests the uncreative nature of the source text. This is not only true for the evocation of emotions but also when it comes to the representation of (cultural) identity and social issues. The type of reader who buys a book published by 'het balanseer', is arguably shocked by the banality of a multilinear narrative that claims to represent everyday life in Flanders. In that recontextualization, Brosi's book gains a critical potential. Still, we should be careful in simply concluding that the book criticises the shallowness of popular culture or, in equating 'uncreative' to 'without value'. The effect of the book is more ambiguous than that, as the gappy experimental writing also shows the complexity of the multilinear narrative of the tv show. If uncreative writing foregrounds the aesthetic value of what is everyday, banal, and predictable, then its criticism of *Thuis* is ambiguous to say the least.

At this point we can therefore observe how the book prompts a reflection upon home, belonging and identity that defies reduction to a single dimension. Due to the book's avant-garde strategy it certainly warrants a critical reading in which homeliness is dismantled as insipid, blind to politics, and narrow-minded. The book highlights familiar and predictable patterns of belonging: uncomplicated intimacy, innocent humor, the local environment portrayed as unthreatening. In particular, the book directs our attention toward the significance of the everyday. However, the book equally allows for an affirmative reading, which recognises the comforting effect of the everyday and of the soap series, and for a grimmer reading, in which homeliness does not imply safety but violence and crime. On a metalevel, there is a similar duality. On the one hand, the skeletal narration of the book exposes the simple plot mechanisms of a soap narrative that is so strongly associated with being at home and with Flemish identity. On the other hand, the novel affirms and even advances the importance of this narrative by turning it into literature. Reading the book as a work of experimental fiction, one can relish the shock, repetitiveness, abstraction, and absurdity of the text.

## **Conclusion**

*Thuis* continues the tradition of appropriation, readymades and uncreative writing. Uncreative writing here reveals the *uncreative* nature not just of the plot summaries but also of the plot and its thematic implications: the portrayal of cultural identity and belonging is homogenising and perhaps not conservative but docile. Published at a time when readers were confined to their homes and when novels contemplate this notion, Brosi's *Thuis* offers a gateway to rethink the meaning of home and the house. The synopses of the soap opera too, may offer escape and safety as well as a threat and a confinement inherent in (Flemish) commonplaces. Evoking the

affective attachment of a Flemish audience to the soap opera, the book reminds us that home can be deceptively familiar and ideologically homogenising.

What is more, the book adds something to those insights through the reference to the tradition of the avant-garde: humor, boredom, shock, and a defamiliarization of what the reader considers as 'home' or as *Thuis*. In this manner, it adds an avant-gardist reading to the revaluation of 'home' discerned by Demeyer & Vitse in contemporary novels beyond postmodernism. 'If every word spoken in New York City daily were somehow to materialise as a snowflake each day there would be a blizzard', Goldsmith writes in his *Soliloquy* (1997). Brosi's *Thuis* is a Flemish blizzard of soap flakes.<sup>32</sup>

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