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MODERN DUTCH LITERATURE AND CULTURE**

**Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in  
Contemporary Dutch Novels**

**Současný nizozemský román po postmodernismu: oscilace, reparace a  
afekt v současných nizozemských románech**

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## Theme and aim of dissertation

The aim of the dissertation is a methodological rethinking of the ways in which contemporary Dutch novels can be read and interpreted. The research departs from the hypothesis that contemporary Dutch fiction can be seen as beyond postmodernism. As such, the research project therefore needs to relate both to the continuity and the legacy of postmodernism (or earlier periods) and to the innovative elements present in the novels. During my research, I have encountered many methodological proposals for the reading and interpretation of contemporary literature. Some of them had a literary-historiographical point of departure, namely, that the postmodern period is over and that it is therefore necessary to look for a new period name or -ism that would be able to unify and characterize contemporary literary production. In an attempt to understand the culture we live in, other proposals lean rather on the critique of ideology or capitalism, following roughly in the footsteps of Fredric Jameson (1989). Neither of the theoretical or methodological concepts introduced in scholarly accounts of contemporary literature however seemed satisfactory to me. The proposals approaching recent literary production as divided by a historic event (for example the turn of the millennium, or the events of 9/11) from the previous period are strongly influenced by a periodizing frame that homogenizes the literature of such a period and places clearly defined breaks in between them. The ideologically critical approaches on the other hand come short because they do not create space to approach fictional characters differently than as products of political, economical and social forces fully determined by them. This is why I have chosen two methodological instruments whose combination balances out the methodological problems that would follow upon their application singularly. At the same time, they create space to read by different means than by means of critique of ideology. These instruments, foregrounding and oscillation, are used for the reading and interpretation of three contemporary novels - *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* by Nelleke Noordervliet, *Klont* by Maxim Februari and *Wij zijn licht* by Gerda Blees. The question from which this research departs and is attempting to answer is: How can the reading practice of scholars do justice to the shift towards affective concerns in contemporary Dutch literature without repeating the tendency to declare this to be a new period?

## Theory and methodology

The scope of the dissertation is delimited by three academic debates that are being led about and are relevant for contemporary Dutch literature. The first debate is asking questions around periodization: (1) Is postmodernism over and if it is, how is this visible in literary production? There is a methodological problem with a question thus formulated, namely; is a literary-historiographical approach, traditionally governed by the idea of bounded and successive periods a methodologically responsible approach to contemporary literature? My answer to this question is inspired by the article by the American literary studies scholars Sebastian Hermann, Katja Kanzler and Stefan Schubert. They draw attention to the presence of a periodizing frame in these approaches, which distorts the perspective on contemporary fiction. On this view, contemporary fiction is perceived as a product of innovation and aesthetic break. This break then alters the characteristics of both the previous period and of the current literary production so that the contrast between these two would become clearer. This insight has led me to seek methodological instruments that would not influence my view of contemporary literature by the use of the periodizing frame. I have found these instruments in the form of foregrounding that focuses on specific textual signals of contemporary novels and

allows me to ask what dominant could be foregrounded by these signals. I have borrowed the concept of foregrounding and the dominant from Roman Jakobson and its more recent applications in the works of Brian McHale (1987) and Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse (2018 and 2020). The second methodological instrument that this dissertation makes abundant use of is the main characteristic of metamodernism, oscillation (Robin van den Akker a Timotheus Vermeulen, 2010 and 2017), that complicates the dynamic of the shift beyond postmodernism by an unceasing pendular movement between modernism and postmodernism. I use oscillation to identify a continuity with the characteristics or interpretations of previous periods (modernism and postmodernism) in contemporary Dutch novels.

The second debate focuses on the question of the strengths and weaknesses of critique as a dominant reading practice for contemporary novels. (2) Do we need a new methodology, reading practice or research agenda for literary studies, and if we do, what should it look like? Rita Felski's books *The Limits of Critique* a *Uses of Literature* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid reading and reparative reading" criticize critique which has become the dominant methodology for the humanities. In these publications, the question of what other methodologies could better serve literary studies is being raised. Sedgwick's essay can be seen as an answer to this question – she presents a rough sketch of the contours of the reparative readerly position which, unlike the paranoid position does not coil upon itself in an endless spiral of paranoia, ideological critique and references to the ubiquitous symbolic violence of discourses used by these systems. An important publication about contemporary Dutch literature, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* by Demeyer and Vitse (2020) also mentions reparative reading, however, the majority of its analyses of 60 contemporary novels is methodologically influenced by a paranoid, ideologically critical reading. My goal is to test the possibilities of reparative reading within the scope of a term coined by Demeyer and Vitse ~~for the interpretation of novels of millennial authors, the affective dominant.~~ This is why, following up on the second debate, unlike Demeyer and Vitse, I theorize the term readerly position and use it for the analysis of the novel *Klont*. By means of foregrounding through the readerly position, affect can be read reparatively rather than from the paranoid position and by means of foregrounding through the textual signals.

Because affect is an important aspect of the readerly position, I deal with the definition of affect in the third debate: (3) What definitions of affect have been produced by the affective turn in the literary studies? In this overview of the genealogy of the term affect, I have delimited my position in relation to the existing approaches and my definition of affect. Hereby I have clarified how my definition of affect influences the results of my research. In this mapping of the extensive field of affect theory, I have been guided by the introductions to *Affect and Literature* (2020) by Alex Houen and *Affect Theory Reader* by Melissa Gregg a Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) and by an article on affect theory approaches used in literary studies by Sandra Moyano Ariza (2020). This article usefully differentiates between a group of approaches called "collective affect" and a different group denoted as "affect-as-lens" that allows for an analysis of intense emotions and affects in literary works. Due to this distinction, I have been able to realize what aim affect is serving in my project.

## Analyses of contemporary novels

The two main instruments used in this dissertation, oscillation and foregrounding, have been used in publications that view contemporary literature as "new" or "different" in comparison to literary works published in the postmodern period. In order to characterize contemporary

literary production, these two publications each introduce different concepts. Metamodernism (Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2010 and 2017) is characterized by oscillation and the affective dominant (Demeyer and Vitse) which is determined based on foregrounding. I use oscillation and foregrounding to interpret the three novels and in each chapter of the dissertation, these instruments appear in a changed guise. In chapter 2, I observe oscillation on the level of textual signals that foreground modernist, postmodernist or affective questions. In the analysis of *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* I conclude that what is being foregrounded by the novel's text is oscillation between various questions. I have come to this conclusion by means of analysis of three different textual signals. The movement of oscillation is foregrounded firstly by means of two storylines of the novel, one of which bears similarity to a detective genre and the other one is concerned with the processing of a personal trauma. The second textual signal, representation of processes of the protagonist's consciousness foregrounds the oscillating movement between rationality and affect. Rationality and affect exchange places in a cause and effect dynamic in two different scenes of the novel. The third textual signal, motif and intertextuality point to an endless oscillation between modernist epistemological and postmodernist ontological (McHale, 1987) and contemporary affective questions (Demeyer and Vitse, 2020). On the literary-historiographical level, we can view oscillation as a continuity between previous periods and contemporary literature. This is how my use of instruments initially developed for approaches making periodizing claims avoids the distortions that might be caused by the use of the periodizing frame.

The analysis in chapter 3 is motivated by a theoretical question: to what extent is foregrounding governed by the text and to what extent is it governed by the reader and his or her values, preconceived notions and preferences? I call these readerly attitude or position. In order to investigate this question in the analysis of *Klont* I draw on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms paranoid and the reparative position. This chapter focuses mainly on fleshing out and demonstrating the use of the reparative position that is less specifically described by Sedgwick. I analysed the two storylines of *Klont* by assuming first the paranoid readerly position when analysing the storyline focusing on Alexei Krups and then by assuming the reparative position for the storyline focusing on Bodo Klein. Since the novel regularly alternates between these two story worlds with their different narrators, the reader is forced to oscillate between the reparative and paranoid positions when reading the novel. By the reader, I mean myself, a trained academic reader, attempting, in assuming the reparative position, to account for the affective aspects of my reading experience and for my bias and fore-meanings as part of the hermeneutic process. Working with affect as part of the process of reading results in heightened self-knowledge as a by-product of the hermeneutic process. In answering the initial question by means of the analysis of *Klont*, I have concluded that it is impossible to completely separate the foregrounding by the text and by the readerly attitude in the course of the interpretation. The idea of the readerly attitude has however led me to explore the reparative attitude which in the end contributed to the design of the relational frame in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 pools the insights from the analyses where foregrounding by textual signals and by readerly position have been applied separately as well as insights from the three theoretical debates. These insights are used for the analysis of *Wij zijn licht* by means of the transhistorical frame used as an alternative to the literary-historiographic discourse defined by the idea of innovation (Vaessens, 2013). Both levels of analysis, textual signals from chapter 2 and readerly attitude, which can also be seen as the personal poetics of each reader, come together in the concept of the frame which is informed by these two aspects. The information

stored in the transhistorical frame allows for the production of interpretations according to it. Within the interpretation according to the relational frame, I also touch on the debate about engagement and autonomy of literature that has been taking place in Dutch literary critique at the same time as the debate about the end of postmodernism. The relational frame allows for the incorporation of new perspectives on the social relevance of literature that came out of this Dutch debate, such as the change of literary paradigm to a relational one, proposed by Aukje van Rooden (2015). In this chapter, oscillation is a movement between the interpretations based on three different frames, a modernist and a postmodernist one (representing continuity), and the relational frame that illustrates the reading practice suggested by this dissertation in a condensed way. This reading practice does justice to the shift towards affect without claiming that contemporary novels are products of a new period or a historical break, thus fulfilling the aim of the dissertation.

## Results of research and its relevance

An important intervention in the way that contemporary novels are being read is the reflection on the readerly position and the affective component that such position presumes. I have also considered the two different levels (textual and that of a readerly position) on which foregrounding works and provided a systematic distinction between them by considering them apart in chapters 3 and 4. Finally, I have designed a tool that pools in all the resources used for and insights gained by the writing of the dissertation, namely, the relational frame. This frame is also incorporating the insights from the reading debate (and its theorization of the readerly position) and can thus function as a counterbalance to the ideologically critical approach to the affective dominant introduced by Demeyer and Vitse. The relational frame is also a structured, condensed and clear way to replicate my methodology and reading for other novels. By designing and testing out the frame in chapter 5, I am hoping to offer a shorthand for the production of oscillating and reparative readings of contemporary novels with an emphasis on affective concerns. I have also made a contribution to the analysis and interpretation of the chosen novels and thus placed them and by extension also their authors into a new light, sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly contrasting my interpretation with that of other influential publications about Dutch contemporary novels that have appeared in the last 10 years.

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### **Author's curriculum vitae**

Anna Krýsová was born in 1992 in Havlíčkův Brod, Czech Republic. She has had her secondary education at Hotel Management School in Poděbrady. In 2011, she started studying a bachelor's program in English Language and Literature and Dutch Language and Literature at the Charles University's Faculty of Arts which she finished in 2015. She pursued both her interests in English and Dutch literature further by enrolling in a master's programme which she finished in 2017. That year she also applied for a PhD programme in Germanic literatures at the same faculty. As part of her research stay in the summer of 2019, she started cooperating on her research project about contemporary novels beyond postmodernism with the scholars of contemporary Dutch literature at Leiden University. This cooperation resulted in a cotutelle agreement between Charles University and Leiden University about the double supervision of her PhD research project, under the leadership of Mgr. Lucie Sedláčková, PhD, Prof. dr. Frans Willem Korsten and dr. Esther Op de Beek. Krýsová has published in *Roczniki Humanistyczne* and *Neerlandica Wratislaviensia* and presented her research at several conferences (Colloquium Neerlandicum in Leuven, 2018, CrossOver Congress in Prague, 2021, expert meeting on metamodernism in Nijmegen in 2021 and Colloquium Neerlandicum 2022 in Nijmegen, among others). She has also organized the CrossOver Congress (2021) and Doctorandi- en Habilitandi Colloquium (2018) in Prague. Between 2020 and 2022, Krýsová has taught courses on Dutch literature at the Department of Dutch Studies at Charles University. She has also participated in several joint translation projects and translated the Dutch novel *Vogelvrij* into Czech.