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Leiden University Centre for the  
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**Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in  
Contemporary Dutch Novels**

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

**Voorbij het postmodernisme: oscillatie, reparatie en affect in  
hedendaagse Nederlandse romans**

**Disertační práce**

**2022**

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**Members of the Doctorate Committee:**

The research and writing of this dissertation has been financially supported by

- Charles University Grant Agency, grant no. 88120, called ‘Beyond postmodernism: oscillation and emancipation in contemporary Dutch novels’, affiliated with Faculty of Arts, Charles University
- Leiden University Centre for Arts in Society, grant for completion of dissertation for external PhDs (September - November 2022)
- Dutch Language Union, grant for purchase and acquisition of primary and secondary literature in 2021 and a grant for a research stay at Leiden University in June - August 2019.

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„Prohlašuji, že jsem disertační práci napsal/a samostatně s využitím pouze uvedených a řádně citovaných pramenů a literatury a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.“

V Haagu 20. 12. 2022

I hereby declare that I have written this dissertation independently, using only the mentioned and duly cited sources and literature, and that the work has not been used in another university study programme or to obtain the same or another academic title.

In The Hague on 20 December 2022

## Abstrakt v češtině

Tato disertační práce se vypořádává s estetickým posunem k afektu a s dědictvím modernismu a postmodernismu v současných nizozemských románech. Klade si tuto výzkumnou otázku: Jak může praxe akademické interpretace učinit zadost posunu k afektivním otázkám v současných nizozemských románech, aniž by opakovala tendenci považovat tento posun za nové období? Tato hlavní otázka shrnuje podotázky vznesené ve třech akademických debatách o současné nizozemské literatuře v posledních 15 letech. Disertace je strukturována teoretickými příspěvky k těmto třem debatám vedeným v odborné literatuře. Teoretické obrysy příspěvků, které jsou rozpracovány v kapitole 1 jsou pak ilustrovány a testovány analýzou tří současných nizozemských románů.

První debata si klade otázky okolo periodizace: (1) Je postmodernismus za námi? Pokud ano, jak se to projevuje v literární produkci? Za touto otázkou se skrývá metodologický problém: je literárně-historiografický přístup, tradičně vedený představou ohraničených a po sobě následujících období metodologicky zodpovědným přístupem k současné literatuře? Moje analýza románu *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* od Nelleke Noordervliet ukazuje, že současné romány by měly být čteny spíše pomocí důrazu na kontinuitu s předchozími obdobími mezi nimiž oscilují signály přítomné v textu románu než pomocí důrazu na inovativní prvky, jakým je afektivní dominantna.

Druhá debata se soustřeďuje na otázku silných a slabých stránek kritiky jakožto dominantní interpretační praxe, skrze kterou přistupujeme k současným románům. (2) Potřebujeme jinou metodologii, interpretační praxi nebo výzkumnou agendu pro studium literatury a pokud ano, jak by měla vypadat? Kapitola 2 pomocí metodologie aktualizace (foregrounding) dochází k závěru, že důraz na kontinuitu s předešlými obdobími je na základě analýzy textu charakteristický pro současné nizozemské romány. V kapitole 3 si však musíme položit následující otázku: kdo způsobuje aktualizaci, text sám, nebo jeho čtenář? Z debaty o interpretační praxi vhodné pro současné romány vyplývá, že je třeba teoreticky vymezit pojem pozice čtenáře (vždy zahrnující také afektivní složku), což v odborné literatuře nenajdeme. V kapitole 3 poukazují v románu *Klont* od Maxima Februariho na rozdíly ve výsledcích interpretace na základě oscilace mezi paranoidním a reparativním čtením jakožto dvěma čtenářskými pozicemi.

Protože afekt je důležitou součástí pozice čtenáře, věnuji se ve třetí debatě definici afektu: (3) Jaké definice afektu vyprodukoval obrat k afektu v humanitních vědách? Vymezují své použití pojmu afekt v návaznosti na různé definice v odborné literatuře a takto vymezený pojem pak používám k vymezení svého použití afektu a reparativního čtení pro návrh nástroje, který pomáhá konsolidovat proces interpretace současných románů do akademické čtenářské praxe. Instrumentem, kterým interpretuji třetí nizozemský román, *Wij zijn licht* od Gerdy Blees, je relační rámec (relational frame). Důraz na oscilaci však zůstává konstantou v mém projektu, protože ve čtvrté kapitole kontrastuji rozdíly mezi interpretací pomocí relačního rámce s výsledky interpretace skrze modernistický a postmodernistický rámec. Vytvořením relačního ráme, který zahrnuje vhledy z posunu literárních věd směrem k afektu a ze třech odborných debat, ilustruji navrženou čtenářskou praxi praktickým a přenositelným způsobem a zároveň odpovídám na výzkumnou otázku této disertace.

## Abstract in English

This dissertation deals with the shift toward affect and the legacy of modernism and postmodernism in contemporary Dutch novels. Its main concern 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? This research question sums up issues raised by three scholarly debates led around contemporary Dutch literature in the last 15 years. The dissertation is structured around my contribution to these three sub-questions raised by secondary literature. The theoretical outlines of this contribution sketched in Chapter 1 are illustrated and tested out by an analysis of three contemporary Dutch novels.

The first debate poses the question of periodization: (1) Is postmodernism over, and if it is, how is this visible in literary production? Hidden behind the periodizing debate is a methodological problem: is the literary historiographical approach, traditionally inspired by the idea of bounded and successive periods a methodologically sound way to approach contemporary literature? Analysing *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* by Nelleke Noordervliet shows clearly that contemporary novels should be read rather through an emphasis on the continuity with previous periods between which the textual signals of the novel oscillate than through an emphasis on the innovative element, such as the affective dominant.

The second debate centres around the question of the strengths and weaknesses of critique as the dominant reading practice by means of which contemporary novels are approached. (2) Do we need a different methodology, reading practice or research agenda in literary studies and if so, what would it look like? Chapter 2 concludes that the emphasis on continuity is more characteristic of contemporary novels by using foregrounding as a methodology. In chapter 3, the following question presents itself: who is doing the foregrounding, the text or the reader? Based on the debate about the reading practice suitable for contemporary novels, I conclude that the readerly position needs to be theorized, including the affective component, which it necessarily always includes, and which has remained unmapped so far. I point out the differences in interpretation that the analysis results in when the readerly position oscillates between paranoid and reparative reading in chapter 3, discussing *Klont* by Maxim Februari.

Because affect is an important component of the readerly position, I turn to the question of defining affect in the third debate: (3) What conceptions of affect has the affective turn in the humanities produced? I place my conception of affect in relation to the existing schools of thought. This conception is then used to define the role of affect and reparative reading in the relational frame. This is an instrument that I have designed and that consolidates the process of interpretation of contemporary novels presented in the previous two chapters into a reading practice. I demonstrate the interpretation according to the relational frame on the third Dutch contemporary novel, *Wij zijn licht* by Gerda Blees. The emphasis on oscillation is however constant throughout this project because I contrast the differences between the interpretation from the relational frame with interpretive results gained by reading through the modernist and postmodernist frame. The creation of the relational frame serves two purposes and is an answer to my research question. Firstly, it incorporates insights from the shift towards affect and the three scholarly debates. Secondly it illustrates my reading practice in a practical and transferable way.

## Klíčová slova v češtině

Postmodernismus, modernismus, afekt, afektivní dominanta, oscilace, metamodernismus, současné nizozemské romány, reparativní čtení, paranoidní čtení

## Key words in English

postmodernism, modernism, affect, the affective dominant, oscillation, metamodernism, contemporary Dutch novels, reparative reading, paranoid reading

## Acknowledgements

With thankfulness, I realize that I have never been completely alone in the writing of the dissertation. Scientific research is a collaborative activity and my acknowledgements reflect that. There have been many people who have surrounded me, helped me, cheered me on and supported me and I would like to name some of them and the ways in which they have done that.

To my sister Eliška, Martina and Martin, three people active in completely different areas of academia; thank you for the honest conversations about the challenges of academic life and about the attitude that a researcher should have.

To Martina and Irena, fellow *neerlandica*'s at Charles University and friends; thank you for the place at your tables, the times that I could hang out in your flats and the hours that we spent working while looking forward to delicious vegetarian food. Apart from these material things, thank you for believing in me and not getting tired of repeating it.

To Yra van Dijk who made me seriously consider researching contemporary Dutch literature; thank you for seeing something in me and being generous with your time and advice even when there was little or no institutional backing.

To Esther and Frans Willem, my supervisors in Leiden; thank you for believing in me, your friendliness, openness, thoroughness, good advice, firm hand and the time you took out for my project.

To Lucie, my supervisor in Prague; thank you for guiding my first steps in the academic world and giving me my first opportunity to teach.

To Melchior, thank your willingness to listen to my half-formed thoughts and doing your best to understand them, for the countless avenues you suggested that my research could explore, for being supportive and patient when I was stuck and feeling hopeless. May the love for books and for each other be a constant in the years to come.

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## Introduction

“Het ging er niet om wie van de twee meer macht uitoefende over de ander, maar om wie van de twee er meer gekoesterd werd.”<sup>1</sup>

It was this quotation from a 2014 novel *De consequenties* by Niña Weijers that made me realize that it might not be only my pious hope that postmodernism as a dominant trend in literary production as well as a reading informed by deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion were over. Weijers’ novel garnered significant critical attention (Olson and Van Dijk, 2015, Demeyer and Vitse, 2018, Op de Beek and Van Dijk, 2019). The author has been hailed as a representative of a new generation of authors and her novel as a new kind of writing. The turn from issues of power (and the subsequent reaction of critics consisting of its unmasking)<sup>2</sup> to interpersonal and emotional concerns expressed by the quotation signalled to me that contemporary fiction is turning to different concerns<sup>3</sup>. My contention is that if literary critics want to appreciate the novels for what they are attempting to express, reflect on and foreground as a concern, a different reading practice is called for than the one that Rita Felski describes as ‘critique’. In this context, the aim of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, to pay attention on the textual and formal level to the interaction between the comparatively innovative affective concerns and the continuities of contemporary Dutch novels with postmodernist and modernist heritage. Secondly, to develop a theoretical concept that defines a reading practice that does justice both to the new and the continuing concerns.

Contemporary Dutch literature has inspired three distinct debates that delimit the breadth of the methodological and theoretical reflection in this dissertation. The three debates are, firstly, the debate on the end of postmodernism which is inspired by posing literary historiographical

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<sup>1</sup> “It was not about which one of the two held more power over the other but who of the two was being more cared for.” Niña Weijers, *De consequenties* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2014), 137-138.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski comments on the suspicion of power typical for critique as the dominant style of literary analysis in the last forty years in the following words: “Knowing full well that all-powerful forces are working behind the scenes, the critic conjures up ever more paralyzing scenarios of coercion and control.” (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 34.)

<sup>3</sup> Demeyer and Vitse (2018) write about a turn in reaction to postmodernism: “In plaats van de ontmaskering van het alledaagse als het resultaat van onderdrukkende machtsrelaties of andere ficties, wordt de controle veeleer omarmd als een antwoord op het verlangen naar zorg en de wil om gekoesterd te worden”. Instead of the unmasking of the mundane as a result of oppressive power relations of other fictions, is control embraced as an answer to the desire for care and the will to be cherished.

questions: is postmodernism over and if it is, what has contributed to its ending, how is this visible in literary production and what should we now read for in contemporary literature? The periodization debate that I consider in the same breath asks itself a broader methodological question, namely, whether the literary historiographical approach, traditionally inspired by the idea of bounded and successive periods is a methodologically sound way to approach contemporary literature.

Secondly, there is a debate on the future research agenda and methodology for literary studies. Questions around what literary studies (and perhaps even more broadly, the humanities) should focus on have arisen with the realization that what the methods inspired by poststructuralism and deconstruction provide are variations on the same insight. I take my cue here from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who claims that this insight is “to unearth unconscious drives or compulsions underlying the apparent play of literary forms”<sup>4</sup> and “to uncover violent or oppressive historical forces.”<sup>5</sup> The third debate may be seen as an answer to the question posed by the second debate about the research agenda and methodology for the humanities. The study of literature should follow literature in the turn suggested by the quotation from *De consequenties*, namely, from issues of power to issues of affect, and study these. This should include paying attention to the affective aspects of the readerly position, as I suggest in chapter 3.

Paying attention to affect has been happening not only in literary studies, but also in the humanities and social sciences ever since the affective turn which I map in the third debate. Affect is a term that has not only a complicated genealogy but also various mutually exclusive conceptions. I explain what I mean when I speak of affect and what part of affect’s genealogical tree I draw on in part 3 of chapter 1. Each debate that I map serves as a steppingstone to a formulation of my contribution to, or intervention in that debate. The contribution is formulated fully in conversation with three contemporary Dutch novels that are analysed in chapters 2, 3 and 4 and that follow the theoretical overview of the three debates. My aims and the three debates to which this study wants to contribute, lead me to the following research question: 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?

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<sup>4</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

## 0.1 The central methodological instruments

I offer an answer or a contribution to the research question and the questions raised by the three debates by means of an analysis in which I use two methodological instruments, foregrounding and oscillation. Foregrounding is an instrument of formalist-oriented textual analysis introduced by Roman Jakobson and employed successfully for the analysis of postmodern and contemporary novels that pose a challenge to the structuralist reading focused on unity and coherence. Jakobson uses foregrounding as an instrument that identifies “the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.”<sup>6</sup> I follow Brian McHale, here, and Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, who have also made use of the concept of the dominant. It therefore plays an important role in my analyses too, especially in chapter 2. However, because the real work of choosing and interpreting specific parts of the novel that I pay attention to has been done by means of the tool of foregrounding, I deviate from McHale and Demeyer and Vitse in referring to foregrounding and not the dominant as the central methodological instrument for my dissertation. Foregrounding is a tool that draws my attention to both the innovative elements and the continuities in the texts. The methodology also accommodates my experiment with foregrounding by means of a readerly position that I engage in in chapter 3.

Oscillation is a concept with a less rich and complex genealogy. It has been recently introduced by Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen as a main characteristic of metamodernism, a term aspiring to fill the terminological void left by the supposed departing of postmodernism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen claim that “metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.”<sup>7</sup> The affectively charged abstracta characterizing the poles that metamodernism oscillates between indicate that the term has been conceptualized as a “structure of feeling that [...] has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies.”<sup>8</sup> As with the dominant, I use the term metamodernism in this

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<sup>6</sup> Roman Jakobson, “The Dominant“, In *Readings in Russian Poetics*, edited by L. Matějka. K. Pomorska, 82. Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Notes on Metamodernism”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2010, Vol.2 (1), p.56-77, 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s or The Emergence of Metamodernism” In *Metamodernism, Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, 4. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

dissertation much less frequently than the tool of oscillation. This is because the scope at which metamodernism functions as a characteristic of Western cultural production that emerged in the 2000s is too broad for my interest in analysis of literary novels.<sup>9</sup> I will explain this at length in chapter 2, that focuses on the first debate mentioned above.

## 0.2 The connections between three theoretical debates and three analyses

The methodological instruments are used in each of the three analyses of contemporary novels, each time on a different level of the analysis. The three chapters of analysis thus build on each other in taking a step further towards the answer to the question of how to read contemporary novels with attention for both continuities and innovative elements. In chapter 2, the analysis of the first novel *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* (Without a North, No One Gets Home)<sup>10</sup> by Nelleke Noordervliet, focuses on what questions – epistemological, ontological or affective – the textual and formal elements foreground on the level of the literary text. In this chapter, I am taking a cue from the way McHale and Jakobson have used foregrounding and dominant. The contribution of chapter 2 to the extant methodologies consists in combining foregrounding with oscillation. I am looking for places where the novel oscillates between foregrounded modernist epistemological, postmodernist ontological and affective questions. This emphasis on oscillation helps me to avoid the danger of constructing too sharp a difference between the innovative elements of this novel (the affective questions) and the continuities (the ontological and epistemological questions). Instead, the analysis of *Zonder noorden* focuses on the continuities with the modernist and postmodern heritage of the novel. This allows me to describe the contours of the shift towards affective concerns without needing to claim that this necessarily results from the whole novel being governed by a new period or concept.

Continuing the explanation of the way in which the three debates, three analytical chapters and three methodological contributions are connected by the use of the terms foregrounding and oscillation, I move on to chapter 3. After having mapped (in chapter 1) the contributions to the

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<sup>9</sup> For the periodisation of the emergence of metamodernism, see Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> None one of the novels that I have chosen to analyse have been translated into English, according to the information available on the website of Nederlandse letterenfonds (Dutch Foundation for Literature). I am however going to use the English translations of the titles in my text. I am going to draw on the translations of titles available on this website or elsewhere in secondary literature throughout the dissertation. All translations of novelistic texts and secondary literature written in Dutch are mine and have been made for the purposes of communicating what the quotation says, not for artistic purposes, which is important especially with regard to the novels.

second debate mentioned above, on new methodology and research questions for literary studies, I come to the conclusion that the (affective) position of the reader needs to be theorized. This insight is caused by the realization that formal and textual elements are not the only aspects contributing to dominant questions becoming foregrounded. The issue is who is doing the foregrounding: the text or the reader who - in academic literary criticism most conspicuously, but not only there<sup>11</sup> - arrives with already pre-formed, theoretically informed preferences? The decision to read a novel from, say, the affective dominant, is influenced by the predilections and preferences of the reader, many of which have an affective component. The concept of the dominant, in McHale's and Demeyer and Vitse's use proves flexible enough to allow for the theorization of the readerly position. In Chapter 3, foregrounding thus works less from within the text and is more based on the readerly attitude as the source of foregrounding. Oscillation appears in this chapter as a movement between two readerly positions that influence foregrounding: a paranoid and reparative one. The theorization of readerly attitude helps to resolve an interpretive problem in the novel analysed in chapter 3, *Klont* (Clump) by Maxim Februari, and illuminates what is at stake when choosing between the widely different interpretations foregrounded by the two readerly positions.

In chapter 4, foregrounding and oscillation appear in a changed guise. By first interpreting contemporary literature by means of a focus on foregrounding and oscillation on the textual level and by subsequently theorizing the level of readerly position, I have laid the foundations to the possibility of designing a theoretical instrument that pools the previously gained insights. This instrument serves the purpose of consolidating the process of interpretation of contemporary novels by means of dominant and oscillation into a reading practice. I draw on the theoretical basis for the transhistorical frame provided by Thomas Vaessens in *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (History of Modern Dutch Literature). Vaessens identifies three constitutive elements of a frame; textual signals (present in the literary text), poetics (attitudes to literature) and socio-cultural context (attitudes to modernity).

The levels at which I have been observing and interpreting literature – foregrounding by means of textual signals and the readerly position – map onto two aspects of the frame, textual signals and the poetics. Based on this overlap, I draw up a new transhistorical frame for the interpretation of contemporary novels. The socio-cultural aspect of the frame has been mapped

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<sup>11</sup> Felski shows what advantages academic criticism can reap from considering the motivations for reading and paying attention to affective states that reading can cause in non-professional readers in *Uses of Literature* (2008).

in the recent publication by Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* (Affective crisis, literary restoration) where they present an ideologically critical take on the analysis of affect in the novels of the millennial authors. Their description of how affect is produced and influenced by social, political and economic circumstances of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is thorough and exhaustive. I therefore mainly focus on the definition of the remaining two aspects (given by Vaessens) of the new relational frame: the textual level and the level related to poetics. In this chapter, oscillation does not get left behind either, because I observe how *Wij zijn licht* (We are light), the debut novel of Gerda Blees, accommodates the oscillation between the readings produced by the different frames.

### 0.3 Choice of analysed novels

My choice of analysed novels might at first sight seem if not random, then certainly eclectic. However, there is method to this madness. The contribution that I am making with the dissertation is rather inspired by methodological and theoretical questions that arise in a project that attempts to interpret novels published after a supposed paradigm and aesthetic shift. The methodological interventions that I am proposing through my use of oscillation, the theorization of the readerly position and finally, the introduction of a new relational frame, are all done for the sake of an informed and responsible reading of the novels which would be fed by recent theoretical insights from the three debates. The novels therefore on the one hand function as illustrations of the theoretical and methodological steps that I have made. On the other hand, I could not have made these steps without the novels. Contemporary novels call for the mapping of the ways in which they foreground several different questions at once and in which they cater to readers with different predilections and preferences. In short, they call for an explanation of the oscillation between continuities and innovative elements. I contend that the theoretical instruments that I designed for the interpretation of these three particular novels will be helpful in the process of interpretation of many other contemporary novels.<sup>12</sup> The foregrounding of the questions might occur by means of different themes, the poles between which the oscillation would take place might express different thematic accents, but affective questions would still

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<sup>12</sup> In the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I have, of course, also read other novels than the three forming my case studies. Among the novels that call for and at the same time can be fruitfully interpreted by means of the relational frame which encapsulates all of my theoretical insights, I can list the already mentioned *De consequenties* by Niña Weijers, *Gebreuk is een groot woord* by Nina Polak, *Onschuld* by Jeroen Theunissen, *Hoor nu mijn stem* by Franca Treur, *Dennie is een star* by Maartje Wortel, *Wormen en engelen* by Maarten van der Graaff, *Fuzzie* by Hanna Bervoets and *De mensengenezers* by Koen Peeters.

be raised. Oscillation would still be a necessary tool that explains contradictory or opposing meanings as the novels navigate the innovative and inherited elements from the three dominants. It would still be necessary to assume the reparative readerly position in order to grasp and appreciate some of the meanings and scenarios that the novels are offering.

Speaking more specifically, my choice for *Without a North*, *No One Gets Home*, *Clump*, and *We Are Light* has been influenced by the positioning and the name that the authors have made for themselves in Dutch literary studies (as is evidenced in both academic and non-academic criticism). Furthermore, my choice has been influenced by the diverse accents that these differences in position have allowed me to make in a characterization of these contemporary novels that might otherwise seem to have nothing in common. The choice of the novels has also been inspired by influential publications of Dutch literary criticism in the last decade. In 2009, Thomas Vaessens published *De revanche van de roman* (The Revenge of the Novel). In this book he has characterised the oeuvre of Maxim Februari as one of the representatives of a new trend of late postmodernism<sup>13</sup> crowning his account of the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch literature. Vaessens however discusses Februari's 2007 novel *De literaire kring* (The Book Club), and I have been interested in whether Februari's next novel confirms the trend sketched by Vaessens or whether there are other aspects of the development beyond postmodernism that he has not considered.

In 2020, another influential publication appeared, namely the already mentioned *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* by Demeyer and Vitse which created a grouping of authors under the denominator 'millennial generation'. As far as age and the foregrounding of affect in her novel is concerned, Gerda Blees would have fitted perfectly into this group, however, her novel was published around the same time as Demeyer and Vitse's book. It was in an implicit dialogue with their publication that I analyzed Blees' novelistic debut. By taking an author who would have fitted very well into their corpus, I wanted to illustrate the differences between their interpretation by means of an affective dominant inflected towards critique of ideology and my relational frame influenced by reparative reading. As for Nelleke Noordervliet, who was born in 1945, she does not fit into either of these groupings or generations constructed by the recent Dutch literary criticism. She is however a bestselling author of literary novels who has been active for more than 30 years in the Dutch republic of letters and her 2009 novel that I have

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<sup>13</sup> Other representatives of this trend include Joost Zwagerman, Arnon Grunberg and Charlotte Mutsaers according to Vaessens (2009,5).



analysed fits my broad category of contemporary novels. By looking at Noordervliet's work through the prism of the affective dominant that Demeyer and Vitse claim is characteristic for the authors of the millennial generation, I contest the emphasis that they have placed on the idea of a new generation. The affective questions are also foregrounded by some parts of Noordervliet's novel, thus complicating the idea that the affective dominant is typical for the novels of the millennials.

#### 0.4 Relevance of the research

In conclusion, this dissertation aspires to offer guidelines for the interpretation of contemporary novels and a methodological reflection on already introduced concepts, such as the affective dominant and metamodernist oscillation. This dissertation intervenes in the way that contemporary novels are being read by reflecting on the readerly position and the affective component that each such position presumes. I have also considered the two different levels – the textual one and that of a readerly position – on which foregrounding works and provided a systematic differentiation 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 analysis of the first two novels and methodological considerations from the three debates, namely, the relational frame. This frame allows for a reading of contemporary novels beyond the postmodernist frame while not succumbing to a periodizing tendency that propels the need to start reading through an entirely different frame. The relational frame also incorporates the insights from the reading debate, with 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, which might otherwise seem the only possible one. 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.

## 1. Chapter 1 Three theoretical debates

This dissertation engages with and contributes to three different theoretical debates. In the chapter that follows, I want to gather the voices that have already taken part in these debates and that my thinking has been informed by, and comment on them. I will also dive deeper into the connections or contradictions between the various voices in the debates, thus framing the three case studies that follow theoretically. Through this mapping of the various debating voices, I will weave my way to what will form my contribution to each debate, a contribution that will be presented in the three chapters with the analyses of contemporary novels.

### 1.1 Debate One: The end of postmodernism and the question of periodization

*“It seems as though more scholars are convinced that ‘postmodernism is dead’ is a consensus view than actually think postmodernism is dead”<sup>14</sup>*

Firstly, there is the debate about the (supposed) end of postmodernism. When researching contemporary novels, one cannot but stumble on a category of literary criticism characterized by viewing contemporary literature as beyond postmodernism or as part of an aesthetic shift that spells the end of postmodernism. The idea of the end of postmodernism is attractive and persistent in the reception of contemporary novels, especially after Linda Hutcheon famously states in the 2002 epilogue to the *Politics of Postmodernism*: “Let’s just say: it’s over.”<sup>15</sup> The it in this quotation is, of course, postmodernism. It is this claim that many representatives of the category of literary criticism concerned with the end of postmodernism have picked up on and quoted.<sup>16</sup> The original point of departure of this dissertation was based on the sense amongst literary scholars that contemporary literature could no longer be called postmodern. It might seem logical to pose the question raised by Alison Gibbons in the title of her article “Postmodernism is dead. What comes next?”<sup>17</sup> Such questions betray a strong historiographic orientation of the first debate. In what follows I am going to map this debate and suggest

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<sup>14</sup> Terence De Toy, *It’s All In the Family—Metamodernism and the Contemporary (Anglo-)—American Novel*, ProQuest: 2015, 23.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 166.

<sup>16</sup> Among the obituarists of postmodernism who refer to this specific claim of Hutcheon’s we can name: Gibbons, “Take That You Intellectuals,” 29, Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism*, 1-2, Van den Akker and Vermeulen, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 58.

<sup>17</sup> Alison Gibbons, “Postmodernism Is Dead. What Comes Next?”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, accessed 19 September, 2022, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/>.

methodological tools with which the questions and problems raised by this debate can be confronted.

Mapping the debate about the end of postmodernism means discovering that the contributions to this debate have already come up with many new labels and -isms to refer to the period or aesthetics characterizing literary or cultural production after postmodernism. It is therefore not necessary, and not my ambition, to have a new period referred to by my coinage. If we can even think of contemporary literature as a new period, that is. This is a question I am planning to investigate in my contribution to the first debate. It can be rather tempting to go the route of coining a new label for the cultural production of, say, the new millennium or for recently published literary production. I am however not going to go this route, as should be clear from my research question. I am however also attempting to map aesthetic developments that have recently occurred or are perhaps still seen as occurring at the time of writing about them. The idea of a singular concept describing a new period in a situation that feels unstable and amorphous, sounds attractive. Especially to critics attempting to characterize cultural production from which they have little or no distance that would enable them to correctly identify the decisive factors influencing cultural production. Fredric Jameson also felt this necessity when writing about postmodernism, as he states in *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. His solution to this perceived necessity is however part of another methodological or ideological tradition than mine: “If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.”<sup>18</sup> The general sense of a cultural dominant that Jameson proposes is anchored in an analysis of the current phase of capitalism in a Marxist vein. The term *cultural* dominant, almost equal to the phase of capitalist development characterized by the term *late* that Jameson uses, should however not be confused with the dominant as a principle structuring literary texts, like the one that I will use in my analysis.

I call the voices that contribute to the first debate, following a succinct and pertinent turn of phrase of Irmtraud Huber, the “obituaries of postmodernism”.<sup>19</sup> The individual contributions to this debate are rather diverse, sometimes these are made in the field of cultural studies or

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<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism Or The Cultural Production of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Irmtraud Huber, *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 255.

aesthetics (Jeffrey Nealon, 2012, Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2010), sometimes more narrowly in literary studies (Josh Toth, 2010, Huber, 2014, Holland, 2013, Timmer, 2010). I have characterized this approach, discussed its conclusions and pointed out its possible shortcomings in a separate article.<sup>20</sup> The publications just listed are book-length studies, but there have also been several articles concerned with the end of postmodernism: Doyle, 2018, Demeyer and Vitse, 2018. The characteristic of many of these publications is not only ringing the death bell of postmodernism. At the same time they also take exploratory steps into the *hic sunt leones* territory that stretches beyond the point at which they had declared postmodernism to be over. The suggestions of names for the new period or territory abound in this kind of secondary literature. Let me however state some of them here insofar as they are relevant for the development of my arguments about the debate on the end of postmodernism. I am first going to discuss the vagueness that characterizes some of the sketches of the shift from postmodernism to the period beyond it. Secondly, I will deal with a lack of clarity and concreteness around the question of what specific characteristics of contemporary Dutch literature can still be called postmodern.

The obituaries of postmodernism rarely state with clarity and specificity what the characteristics are of the innovative elements in the contemporary literary production and in what way the works are still drawing on, and relate to, characteristics of postmodernism. Several representatives of the obituaries of postmodernism (Van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017, Gibbons 2015, Doyle 2018) present the continuity with postmodernism as a matter of stylistics. Gibbons analyses the stylistics of Adam Thirlwell's novella *Kapow!* and declares that the novella's use of "perceptual deixis, free indirect discourse, and modes of address, particularly in their play with the possibilities of pronominal positioning"<sup>21</sup> suggests that "the writing of metamodernist authors has the ability to raise the consciousness and conscience of the general public."<sup>22</sup> She is however one of the few obituarists of postmodernism who are so thorough and specific. Raoul Eshelman's statement is typical of the vagueness that often characterizes general descriptions of the aesthetic shift beyond postmodernism: "All performatist works feed in some way on postmodernism; some break with it markedly, while others retain typical devices but

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<sup>20</sup> An overview of publications making this claim can be found in my article: Anna Krýsová, "Esthetische verschuivingen in contemporaine literatuur en hun methodologische principes", *Neerlandistica Wratislaviensia*, No 30, (2020) <https://doi.org/10.19195/0860-0716.30.6>.

<sup>21</sup> Gibbons, "Postmodernism Is Dead", 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> Gibbons, "Postmodernism Is Dead", 31.

use them with an entirely different aim.”<sup>23</sup> In his article “The changing face of post-postmodern fiction: Irony, sincerity, and populism”, Jon Doyle characterizes the shift beyond postmodernism, that he demonstrates through an analysis of Nathan Hill’s novel *The Nix*, in general terms: “Just as postmodernism is intrinsically linked to and informed by modernism, post-postmodernism must assess and utilize thematic and stylistic aspects of postmodernism and employ them against the strategies and beliefs of its predecessor to find a path forward.”<sup>24</sup> If we imagine Gibbons’ characterization of contemporary novels as the extreme of specificity and Eshelman’s observation as the extreme of vagueness, than Doyle’s characterization sits around the middle of the spectrum.

When obituarists of postmodernism move from vague to specific characterizations of contemporary literature, it is often accompanied by a change of focus from literary-historiographical considerations to thematic ones. In the analysis of specific literary works that can be seen as characteristic of the aesthetic shift, trend, or label ‘beyond postmodernism’ that they have newly created, the obituarists often use other themes or issues by means of which they concretize the analysis. This role, to name just a few examples, is played by irony and sincerity (Doyle), performance of subjectivity untouched by postmodernism (Eshelman) and by reconstructive fantasies (Huber). In my search for the tools with which to conceptualize the aesthetic shift and analyse the contemporary novels, I do not want to have recourse to viewing the shift beyond postmodernism through another issue or theme. I want to be able to translate the conclusions made in the formal and textual analysis of novels to the level of literary historiography. Generally speaking, it may be observed, based on these characteristics of obituaries of postmodernism, that they create a rather sharp division between postmodernism and whatever comes after or beyond it. The attempts to formulate an answer to the question of what comes after postmodernism are prone to being governed by what Thomas Vaessens calls “the modern veneration of the new”<sup>25</sup> in his book *History of Modern Dutch Literature*. This leads to literary historiography being “presented as a continuous fight between [...] generations

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<sup>23</sup> Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, Or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, Colorado: The Davies Group Publishers: 2008), xiv.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Doyle, “The Changing Face of Post-Postmodern Fiction: Irony, Sincerity, and Populism.” *Critique - Bolingbroke Society* 59, no. 3 (2018), 260 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1381069>. Accessed 31 October 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “De moderne verering van het nieuwe.” Thomas Vaessens, *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013), 107. I am quoting Vaessens to make a general point about literary historiography, not to suggest that *History of Modern Dutch Literature* is influenced by the periodizing framework or that it belongs with the obituaries of postmodernism.

focused on innovation”.<sup>26</sup> The same tendency is pointed out specifically with regard to the work of the obituarists of postmodernism and criticized by Sebastian Herrmann, Katja Kanzler and Stephan Schubert in their article “Historicization without Periodization: Post-Postmodernism and the Poetics of Politics”. Let us therefore now look at the critique of the obituaries of postmodernism that the German researchers have formulated. Specifically, they criticize the use of a periodizing framework, that is of thinking about literary history in terms of periods that have a beginning and an end.

Herrmann et al. point out several distortions that the use of the periodizing frame can have for an account of contemporary literature, especially if it departs from the hypothesis of the end of postmodernism. As Vaessens points out, the focus on progress and innovation is inherent in the periodizing accounts of literary history. For this, a sharp contrast between the old and the new is welcome as it increases the strength of the explanatory model. In the attempt to create the sharp boundary between the current trend and postmodernism, the latter functions as a foil against which the new is being defined. Postmodernism is thus, in the words of Herrmann et al. being forged “into a period characterized by literature’s disavowal of politics and social referentiality, by writing ‘narcissistically’ concerned with itself, by writing whose pervasive irony prevents it from any serious and sincere engagement with social reality.”<sup>27</sup> Another valid critical point that Herrmann et al. raise is that the periodizing framework used in the obituaries creates a sharp contrast between the periods, both by virtue of them being called periods and because of the need for a clear break. This results in the literary production associated with a certain period being represented as homogeneous: “The homogeneity that is enforced in this case is particularly problematic because it tends to reduce postmodernism to the work of primarily white male writers who reflect an interest in poststructuralist ideas.”<sup>28</sup>

The periodizing framework influences the way in which contemporary literature is being viewed and interpreted. As an important principle that governs literary historiography, periodization results in attention being focused on the innovative, new aspects of literary texts and the aspect of continuities with the past styles or poetics is being underplayed and underemphasized. Talking about the framework of periodization, Herrmann et al. state:

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<sup>26</sup> “voorgesteld als een voortdurende strijd tussen [...] vernieuwingsgezinde generaties.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur*. 107.

<sup>27</sup> Sebastian Herrmann et al. “Historicization without Periodization: Post-Postmodernism and the Poetics of politics”, 7, accessed 23 September 2019, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:15-qucosa-207652> .

<sup>28</sup> Herrmann et al., “Historicization without Periodization”, 7.

This investment in boundaries and the practices of dichotomization on which it builds not only result in fairly narrow corpora of texts that fit the respective conception of the contemporary moment, they also conceal the multiple points of continuity and dialogue between supposedly postmodern and post-postmodern aesthetics [...] <sup>29</sup>

In order to counteract the problematic consequences of the periodizing framework, I am going to pay attention to both continuities with postmodernism and to the innovative features of contemporary novels. Continuities are going to play an important role in my analysis of *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* (Without the North, No One Gets Home) by Nelleke Noordervliet.<sup>30</sup> I will first discuss the methodological advantages and disadvantages of the concepts dominant and oscillation that I have chosen to counter the consequences of periodization in the first case study and for other purposes in other case studies.

### 1.1.1 Contextualization and critique of oscillation as a concept

Van den Akker and Vermeulen are one of the obituarists of postmodernism who have come up with a new label to conceptualize the time after postmodernism's departure. Metamodernism "is a structure of feeling that emerged in the 2000s and has become a dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies."<sup>31</sup> As such, the term metamodernism will not often be used in this dissertation because it is too broad for my purposes, as will be made clear later. It is however characterized by *oscillation*, an unceasing, negotiating movement between modernism and postmodernism which is a concept I will use frequently and in each of the three analyses of my dissertation. As a concept that complicates and obstructs the simple, progressive, linear movement from one period to another, oscillation functions as a useful methodological antidote against periodization. Taking oscillation into account, prevents us from being carried away by the idea of literary periods as chronologically ordered and alternating with each other with clear moments of breaks in between.

The problem with the use of the concept of metamodernism or oscillation between modernism and postmodernism for the purposes of the analysis of literary texts is, however, that Van den Akker and Vermeulen have coined the term metamodernism to characterize a structure of feeling, a notoriously nebulous idea introduced by Raymond Williams. Moreover, Van den

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<sup>29</sup> Herrmann et al., "Historicization without Periodization", 8.

<sup>30</sup> The novel has not been translated into English. The translation of the title is from *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*. Odile Heynders, "Responsible Writing: Nelleke Noordervliet," 181. In *Women's Writing from the Low Countries 1880-2010*, edited by Jacqueline Bel and Thomas Vaessens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 4.

Akker and Vermeulen are not literary critics but more broadly oriented philosophers or theoreticians of culture and aesthetics. They use metamodernism to characterize all types of cultural production of the new millennium. Their project follows in the footsteps of Jameson who equals the cultural production with a certain phase of capitalism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen are giving us a ten-thousand-foot view of the Western cultural production of the new millennium and of the political, cultural, economic and ecological circumstances that generate and influence it. It is at this level that they speak of oscillation between modernism and postmodernism as a structure of feeling. This can however be confusing at first sight for a literary historiographer because although both terms, modernism and postmodernism, are pertinent and relevant for the study of literature, they do not immediately offer a grip for the analysis of literary texts.

Another modification that I am making to the concept of oscillation as originally conceived by Van den Akker and Vermeulen, is also made for the sake of greater specificity. Van den Akker and Vermeulen claim that metamodernism, understood as a structure of feeling, “should be situated beyond the postmodern”<sup>32</sup> while “moving back and forth between positions (modern and postmodern, say)”.<sup>33</sup> Oscillation is supposed to capture a sense of metamodernism returning to, or even recycling, some older styles and concerns. More specifically, Van den Akker and Vermeulen claim that “there is some kind of cultural predilection, among all of the now-newly available ‘pre-postmodern’ elements, for modernism.”<sup>34</sup> The suggestion of centrality of modernist elements for literature does not offer enough support when it comes to analysing the contemporary novel. Moreover, if it were to play a central role in my analysis of a contemporary novel as metamodern, it would have an unwanted consequence. Firstly, this would clash with another important characteristic of metamodernism which is its orientation towards the future: “For indeed, that is the ‘destiny’ of the metamodern wo/man: to pursue a horizon that is forever receding.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, I am complicating the idea of oscillation as a movement between two poles as it has originally been proposed, by adding another pole to it in order to account not only for continuities (modernism and postmodernism) but also innovations. The affective dominant which I consider to be the innovative concept in contemporary literature will be introduced in the following subsection.

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<sup>32</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen *Metamodernism*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen *Metamodernism*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen *Metamodernism*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, “Notes on Metamodernism”, 67.



### 1.1.2 Contextualization and critique of dominant as a concept

The concept of the dominant has a long history in literary criticism. The use of the dominant is in sync with another current research trend: the affective turn, which is characteristic for the work of Demeyer and Vitse, who also depart from the hypothesis of the end of postmodernism. Demeyer and Vitse's article "De affectieve dominant. Een ideologiekritische lezing van recent Nederlandstalig proza" (The Affective Dominant. An ideology-critical reading of contemporary Dutch fiction), reads in places as an account of contemporary literature from a literary historiographical point of view. Their use of the dominant concept drawing on Brian McHale's usage favours periodization. Demeyer and Vitse also connect periodizing tendencies to their use of the concept of the affective dominant – the dominant is an instrument that helps them to capture the historiographical shift that they are witnessing in contemporary literature. This aspect is mostly emphasized in their article from 2018. In their subsequent large-scale exploration of millennial novels by means of the affective dominant in their 2020 book *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*, the literary historiographical aspects of the affective dominant do not come to the fore as much.

Demeyer and Vitse's employment of the term dominant is based on McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* in which he identifies and interprets the titular fiction by means of this concept. McHale's book bears witness to the legacy of structuralism because it conceives of the dominant as a tool that formulates a common denominator uniting various characteristics of modern and postmodern texts. McHale departs from "(c)atalogues of postmodernist features [...] organized in oppositions with features of modernist poetics"<sup>36</sup>, looking for "the dominant that 'rules, determines, and transforms' the components of this text, guaranteeing the integrity of its structure."<sup>37</sup> The structuring component that he finds for the postmodern dominant is ontological uncertainty; for the modernist dominant it is epistemological uncertainty. The influence of structuralism can be felt in the emphasis that McHale places on systematization and abstraction. This is due to the concept of dominant originally being coined by the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson. The dominant governing a given text, can be established based on the principle of foregrounding.

In both Jakobson's and McHale's use, foregrounding only functions on the level of literary texts, pointing the interpreter's attention in certain directions by means of textual and formal

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<sup>36</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen: 1987), 7.

<sup>37</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9.

equivalences or deviations that thus become conspicuous and force the readers to ask themselves certain questions around these foregrounded elements. This is also a rather formalist and structuralist emphasis based on the primacy of the idea of the autonomy of a literary text. McHale draws on this conception which leads him to the idea that literary works are governed by one dominant question which can be defined in abstract terms. However, both the idea of the governing, overarching structure and the high degree of abstraction is problematic because they are too strongly influenced by structuralism. This is why these characteristics have been subsequently problematized by poststructuralist thought. To be sure, McHale attempts to deconstruct the dominant himself but does not go far enough.<sup>38</sup> The structuralist undertones of the dominant also have consequences for literary historiography: this conception supports the traditional governing principle of literary historiography, innovation and break. By exploring the operation of foregrounding on another level than that of a formal analysis of textual feature, I am loosening the structuralist overtones of the concept of dominant. The dominant should not function as a literary equivalent to “one Ring to rule them all”.<sup>39</sup>

Again, like with metamodernism and oscillation, the term affective dominant is going to be less important for my methodology than the tool of foregrounding. I will use foregrounding on the textual level in chapter 2; in chapter 3, I will explore the idea of foregrounding by means of readerly attitude. In the chapter 4, foregrounding will play a role on the level of textual signals, an element forming the concept of the relational frame that I design and use as an interpretive tool for the reading of contemporary literature. In chapter 1, the oscillating movement is going to be used as a metaphor for the way in which formal aspects of literary text can be used for an interpretation according to different dominants. McHale emphasizes that the dominant “specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications.”<sup>40</sup> He suggests here that it

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<sup>38</sup> McHale is aware of these structuralist overtones of the dominant and attempts to reconstruct them: “‘Hierarchical’? ‘Monolithic’? To pre-empt the deconstruction that such deterministic and imperialistic language, with its overtones of power and coercion, seems to call for, let me try to salvage Jakobson’s dominant for my own uses by deconstructing it a bit myself.” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 6) McHale’s deconstruction of the dominant ultimately consists of stating that Jakobson talks about a plurality of dominants and that “one and the same text will [...] yield different dominants depending upon what aspect of it we are analyzing.” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 6).

<sup>39</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, HarperCollins E-books, 4. Accessed 31 October 2022, <https://ia601003.us.archive.org/3/items/j-r-r-tolkien-lord-of-the-rings-01-the-fellowship-of-the-ring-retail-pdf/j-r-r-tolkien-lord-of-the-rings-01-the-fellowship-of-the-ring-retail-pdf.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 11.

is possible to read the same textual element through several different dominants, each of which provide their set of defining questions.

I regard the oscillating continuities as more characteristic for contemporary literature than the idea that the text is structured by one dominant question and that these dominants would follow each other in linear succession, as McHale suggests: “For to describe change of dominant is in effect to describe the process of literary-historical change.”<sup>41</sup> The most important characteristic of metamodernism, namely oscillation between the modern and the postmodern is thus made operationalized for the analysis of a literary text through the combination of both methodological tools as oscillation between various foregrounded questions.

## 1.2 Debate 2 Reading debate

*(W)hy am I so sure that the appropriate relationship that I am supposed to have to texts is one of mastery and dominance, one in which they are a riddle and I figure them out?*<sup>42</sup>

The second debate that this dissertation contributes to is one reflecting on the methodologies that literary studies have developed and have been using since poststructuralism, it is a debate on the re-evaluation of these methodologies (which various critics name differently),<sup>43</sup> sometimes including also a suggestion for the future research questions or agendas of literary studies. Heather Love calls this set of debates “the reading debates”.<sup>44</sup> One of the best known currently active voices in this debate is Felski. She makes suggestions for alternative questions and new methodologies complementing these both in *Uses of Literature* (2008) and *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Felski is however not alone in sounding this note; in both books she draws on the thoughts of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who has been reflecting on her own methodology

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<sup>41</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Hanna McGregor, “Book 7 Chapter 24 The Wandmaker”, in *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, produced by Ariana Nedelman, podcast, 04:27, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/571a6e39b6aa608067028725/t/602158b0fe0b00757f99bfc7/1612798128924/HPST+transcript+7.24.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Rita Felski writes about *critique*, whereas Terry Eagleton wonders to what task *theory* should direct its energies in *After Theory*. Both critics are motivated by a sense of the end of postmodernism in their search for a new job for literary studies. In Felski’s case, this is implicit, but the sense that new research agendas need to be outlined and new questions need to be posed is still present because the old ones and the ways of answering them do not serve us anymore.

<sup>44</sup> Heather Love, “Critique is Ordinary,” *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017) 365, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2010.0022>.

used for example in her 1990 publication, *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick's work functions as a turning point in two out of the three debates that I am looking at. In the third part of this chapter, I will also map Sedgwick's contribution to the affective turn, which might be seen as an answer to the question of what the research agenda for literary studies after postmodernism can be.

In order to link this second debate with the first one, I am taking a leaf out of Van den Akker and Vermeulen's book. They feel the need to find "a new language to put into words this [...] cultural landscape. [...] For us, this language is metamodernism,"<sup>45</sup> they state clearly. To be able to analyse art beyond postmodernism, Van den Akker and Vermeulen find it necessary to establish a new critical idiom. By drawing on the second debate about the reflection of the methodology for literary studies, I am making the same move as they are on the level of "contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics,"<sup>46</sup> only I am making it in the much more specific area of literary studies. In her reflection on the methodology used in the "literary and cultural studies over the last four decades,"<sup>47</sup> Felski singles out critique as an umbrella-term by means of which she will describe the characteristics of this general thought style. She defines critique as "a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work [...]."<sup>48</sup> Sedgwick shares a similar insight in an essay published in 2003 in *Touching Feeling* where she refers to the methodology that Felski calls 'critique' as paranoid reading. Reflecting on the methodology which was predominant in her field, queer theory, Sedgwick asks herself with regard to this 'paranoid reading': "How did it spread so quickly [...] to being its uniquely sanctioned methodology?"<sup>49</sup> In a move characteristic of the rising importance of attending to affect that drawing on Sedgwick's work has also instituted in literary studies, Felski pays more attention to the affective style and tone of critique: "suspicious reading turns out to be a style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intense engagements and eager commitments."<sup>50</sup>

Felski's critique echoes that of Sedgwick in saying that the interpretive work of a literary critic has been restricted "to a single-minded digging for buried truths"<sup>51</sup> which has become "a

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<sup>45</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 126.

<sup>50</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

permanent domicile and dwelling place for criticism ‘after the linguistic turn’.<sup>52</sup> Sedgwick’s essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” contains a similar concern about the narrowing down of the methodologies and the affective attitudes connected with them that “impoverish the gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills. The trouble with a shallow gene pool, of course, is its diminished ability to respond to environmental (e.g., political) change.”<sup>53</sup> The care that literary scientists should take that their methodologies would be able to respond to changing environmental circumstances is of course not inspired by only narrowly scientific concerns and motivations but also by political and economic ones: “Such a reorientation, with any luck, might inspire more capacious, and more publicly persuasive, rationales for why literature, and the study of literature, matter.”<sup>54</sup> Both Felski’s and Sedgwick’s suggestions for a solution to the current situation that they find problematic are different: Felski pools resources together from writers that exhibit a different than the “vigilant, wary, mistrustful”<sup>55</sup> attitude characteristic for critique. These writers admit and work with “the many other reasons why we are drawn to works of art: aesthetic pleasure, increased self-understanding, moral reflection, perceptual reinvigoration, ecstatic self-loss, emotional consolation, or heightened sensation—to name just a few.”<sup>56</sup>

Sedgwick’s alternative methodology for queer studies is reparative reading, which she, along with the paranoid position based on the psychoanalytical theory of Melanie Klein describes as “the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects.”<sup>57</sup> Paranoid and reparative positions transferred to the area of queer studies or, taken more broadly, cultural and even literary studies “represent a way [...] of seeking, finding and organizing knowledge.”<sup>58</sup> Reading, on Sedgwick’s telling, can thus produce distinctively flavoured knowledge, depending on the position from which we engage in it. She does not give concrete pointers for how to read novels reparatively, but does say the following:

to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. [...] Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience is among

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<sup>52</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 192.

<sup>55</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 188.

<sup>56</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 188.

<sup>57</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>58</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

the energies by which a reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates.<sup>59</sup>

I have taken up these general hints that Sedgwick gives about the reparative position and worked them into a functional methodology for interpretation of literary text in chapter 2 by means of the concept of a readerly attitude – a concept closely related to the position or posture that Sedgwick talks about.

### 1.2.1 Temporal and disciplinary contextualization of Sedgwick's thought

However, in order to be able to draw on Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading for literary studies, two contextualizing moves are in order. Firstly, placing the essay in its proper historical context and secondly, in the scientific field for which it originally constituted a methodological reflection, namely queer studies. The annexation of Sedgwick's ideas solely by "the current reading debates"<sup>60</sup> that according to Gila Ashtor some also blame Felski of, is something I want to avoid. Firstly therefore, let us contextualize Sedgwick's seminal essay temporally. Robyn Wiegman, a scholar of queer studies pays attention to the common misplacement of the origins of Sedgwick's thought in time and therefore, the historical context by which it was influenced. Wiegman points out that when Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" is taken up in the debate about the re-evaluation of the methodology for literary studies, scholars often refer to the 2003 publication, thus mistakenly placing the origin of these thoughts into the historical context of "a post 9-11 rethinking of paranoid sensibilities".<sup>61</sup> Sedgwick's formulation of the reparative position however needs to be understood in the context of the 1990's "disgust with the national fantasy of gay extermination propelled by the health emergency of AIDS and by her personal battle with breast cancer."<sup>62</sup>

Wiegman thus places the origin of reparative reading a decade earlier: "Sedgwick's essay [...] began as a four page introduction to the 1996 special issue of *Studies in the Novel* under the title 'Queerer than Fiction'."<sup>63</sup> This allows a different context to come into play, both temporally (the period when queer theory was becoming institutionalized) and in the right discipline (queer studies). Wiegman argues that current removal of reparative reading from both these contexts

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<sup>59</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.

<sup>60</sup> Gila Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis of Critique," *Criticism* (Detroit) 61, no. 2 (2019), 192, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.61.2.0191>.

<sup>61</sup> Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're in: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative 'turn,'" *Feminist Theory* 15, no. 1 (2014), 9, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700113513081a>.

<sup>62</sup> Wiegman, "The Times We're in", 9.

<sup>63</sup> Wiegman, "The Times We're in", 8.

leads to a misunderstanding consisting of seeing the two positions as “antithetical or as sequential”.<sup>64</sup> Sedgwick herself places the development of the alternative to paranoid thinking in the context “of the predominance of the self-perpetuating kinds of thought that I increasingly seemed to be recognizing under the rubric of paranoia”<sup>65</sup> which led her to “a series of experiments aimed at instantiating, and making somehow available to readers, some alternative forms of argument and utterance.”<sup>66</sup>

In an article that attempts to place Sedgwick’s legacy in its proper disciplinary context, Ashtor points to the connection between the second and third debate that my dissertation contributes to, namely to Sedgwick’s impact on the development of queer studies “away from sexuality and toward affect, in what would eventually develop into the separate and robust critical discourse known as Affect Theory.”<sup>67</sup> Ashtor’s recontextualization of reparative reading also objects to perceiving Sedgwick’s intervention as an antithesis to the hermeneutics of suspicion, a hegemonic methodology in literary and cultural studies “over the last four decades,”<sup>68</sup> as Felski puts it. Ashtor claims that Sedgwick’s attempt to formulate “ways of understanding human desire that might be quite to the side of prohibition and repression”<sup>69</sup> needs to be understood within the tradition of a wider category of methodological approaches to literary studies that she refers to as practical critique. This approach takes an issue with “a theoretical apparatus that seems [...] to compromise the ‘quality’ of *reading*.”<sup>70</sup> With this move, Ashtor seems to place Sedgwick’s legacy back into the reading debate. In her article, however, she redefines its stakes of the reading debate: “Because ‘quality’ is a value, it is always tied to a normative ideal; for this reason, a necessary step in comprehending any ‘practical critique’ involves a distillation of the broader agenda *reading* is meant to serve.”<sup>71</sup>

Because Sedgwick is interested in “speculative reading,”<sup>72</sup> according to Ashtor, she dives into figuring out what the goal of Sedgwick’s speculative reading is. What is highly relevant for my mapping of the debate on the methodology for literary studies is the difference that Ashtor

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<sup>64</sup> Wiegman, “The Times We’re in”, 12.

<sup>65</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and The Difference Affect Makes,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 640, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-020>.

<sup>66</sup> Sedgwick, “*Melanie Klein*,” 640.

<sup>67</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 192.

<sup>68</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 194.

<sup>71</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 194.

<sup>72</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 195.

institutes between “‘sociological’ criticism”<sup>73</sup> and a speculative one. The former addresses “the relation of individual in society”<sup>74</sup> as opposed to the latter problematizing “the individual as a system”.<sup>75</sup> Ashtor thus reorients the debate around the task of literary critique away from pathological designation of critical agendas (calling critique a sign of paranoia)<sup>76</sup> and to an identification of two general trends in critique, sociological and speculative. Sedgwick’s critique expressed by associating the pathologizing term paranoia with a widespread epistemological regime in literary and cultural studies is according to Ashtor an expression of “frustration of a critic trying to do ‘speculative’ work with ‘sociological’ tools.”<sup>77</sup> These two trends clearly have a different goal and require a different methodology. Ashtor further remarks on the decisively speculative goals of Sedgwick’s, that is, those focused on mapping the complexities of an individual as system and the fact that Sedgwick lacks the methodology to reach these goals: “Sedgwick’s oeuvre is therefore marked by her delicate negotiation of the tension among her interests in desire, motivation, and the human psyche within a theoretical landscape that was enduringly hostile to those kinds of concerns.”<sup>78</sup>

Ashtor’s definition of the speculative approach helps to explain how I am interested in analysing *Klont* (Clump). In chapter 4, my analysis is going to oscillate between mapping the affects of characters and analysing the complexity of their psychic life (speculative approach) and placing the affects in their ideological, political and economic context (sociological approach). The latter also agrees with the original methodological suggestion of Demeyer and Vitse for the affective dominant, as I will discuss at length in chapter 4. Despite Demeyer and Vitse’s mention of reparative reading and their intention to read reparatively, their approach to the affective content of contemporary novels stays firmly within the realm of sociological critique. The subject and their affective experience are always determined by the system in Demeyer and Vitse’s book *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*. This corresponds to the sociological critique’s “attempt to ‘imagine the relation between the lived experience of the subjects and the larger

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<sup>73</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 212.

<sup>74</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 195.

<sup>75</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 195.

<sup>76</sup> Unlike Sedgwick who pathologizes, as Ashtor points out, Felski makes a decision not to call critique paranoid because she does not want to make the impression of speculating about the psychological diagnoses of her colleagues.

<sup>77</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 208.

<sup>78</sup> Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 208-209.



systems they inhabit”<sup>79</sup> while supposing that “the power of the system remains fully assumed.”<sup>80</sup>

In order to engage in reparative reading, which can be seen as one of the practices within the speculative approach, the attention of the critique must move away from how the individual relates to the larger system (a character in a novel or the novel itself to the social and economic factors that affect it) and move towards the event of reading (how does the literary text represent the individual as a complex system?) Demeyer and Vitse’s call for political change, suggested by the title of the final chapter “Emotionally detached? It might be politics!”<sup>81</sup> in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* is the only thing that their methodology allows them to imagine as a reparation of the affective crisis that they perceive in the novels of the millennial generation. This demonstrates that if a reparative impulse is combined with ideological critique (or, in Ashtor’s terms, a sociological approach), the only imaginable and relevant kind of reparation that can occur, is external. It is the world that needs to be repaired. However, if reparation is approached in terms of speculative approach, as I intend to do, this shifts the attention to the level of a relationship between the reader and the text and to the event of reading. What the consequences are of such a methodology will be demonstrated in the latter half of chapter 4.

### 1.2.2 Theorization of readerly attitude and its shift in obituaries of postmodernism

My concern with the second debate on the methodology for literary studies beyond the methodological constraints of the sociological approach within cultural theory has resulted in a theorization of readerly attitude which has become an important steppingstone towards what I consider to be the final contribution of my dissertation. This is a suggestion for a conceptual instrument for the interpretation of novels beyond postmodernism. I have realized that in order to incorporate the insights from the second debate into how I work with my two main methodological instruments, the *dominant* and *oscillation*, I needed to rethink the conception of the dominant and the level at which the movement of oscillation happens. In chapter 4, I am therefore not using the dominant as a structuralist tool that allows me to look at the textual and formal elements foregrounding a thematic question as I did in chapter 3. I am taking clues from the deconstructive gestures present both in McHale’s and Demeyer’s texts proposing the dominant as a methodological tool and taking them further by suggesting that the perceived

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<sup>79</sup> Amanda Anderson, “Therapeutic Criticism“ *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 50, no. 3 (November 2017): 321–328, 324. Quoted in Ashtor, “The Misdiagnosis,” 195.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, “Therapeutic Criticism,” 322.

<sup>81</sup> “Onthecht? Het zou politiek kunnen zijn!” Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: de romans van de millennialgeneratie*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 281.

aesthetic shift beyond postmodernism is not happening only on the level of the literary text but that it is also a consequence of a changed readerly attitude described on a theoretical level by Sedgwick. In other words, I want to suggest that professional readers have started reading differently and thus, to a certain extent, produced the observed change in the texts themselves by means of a changed reading practice. In what follows I want to look at two obituaries of postmodernism and observe to what extent the observations about the aesthetic shift beyond postmodernism might be caused by a shifting readerly attitude (alongside with the changes in the literary texts themselves).

Mary K. Holland's book *Succeeding Postmodernism* is highly informative for my inquiry into the role that readerly attitude plays for the conclusions of research informed by the hypothesis of the end of postmodernism, specifically concerning such questions as: have the analysed novels moved beyond postmodernism? Holland's hypothesis is that

we have often mischaracterized postmodern literature— especially fiction that takes as its starting point the language problems described by deconstruction theory—as unable to represent or care about the things that literature has traditionally cared most about: human relationships, emotional interaction with the world, meaning.<sup>82</sup>

Holland attempts to throw a new light on “the relationship between language and the human”<sup>83</sup> in “poststructuralist (language-obsessed) literature”.<sup>84</sup> She looks at “American novels of the 1980s and 1990s”<sup>85</sup> of such authors as Don DeLillo and A. M. Homes but also at novels published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Everything is Illuminated* by a generation younger Jonathan Safran Foer. In spite of the difficulties that the texts themselves pose to such a pursuit, she traces essentially humanist concerns in these novels, whose preoccupation with and exploration of language makes a portrayal of relationships, emotions and meaning complicated. I see the decision to look for humanist concerns that Holland's research question testifies to as an example of how a decision on the level of a readerly attitude that she has chosen to assume towards the novels can influence the conclusions one reaches about the studied novels. She concludes that the literature she has read remains

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<sup>82</sup> Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic: 2013), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 6.

“postmodern in its assumptions about the culture and [...] poststructural in its assumptions about the arbitrariness and problems of language”<sup>86</sup> while using “this postmodernism and poststructuralism to humanist ends of generating empathy, communal bonds, ethical and political questions.”<sup>87</sup> The decision to focus on empathy, ethics and community is thus a sign of a shift in readerly attitude. It might have felt more urgent (to speak with McHale) to earlier critics and readers of these novels to interrogate the novels around the ontological questions or to question the relation of the novels’ linguistic representations and reality. In Holland’s final analysis, influenced by the periodizing frame, she however suggests that “we are seeing not the end of postmodernism, but its belated success”<sup>88</sup> because postmodernism has never been as decisively anti-humanistic as it has gone down in history books.

A similar exploration is undertaken by Irmtraud Huber in a sample of American novels from the turn of the millennium, which partially overlaps with the choice of novels made by Holland (notably in the case of *House of Leaves* or *Everything is Illuminated*). In these difficult and formally experimental novels with postmodernist poetics, Huber is undertaking a reconstructive reading that points beyond postmodernism. Her reading suggests that the novels offer

a profession of faith in the ultimate possibility of communication, established in intersubjective relations and based on a shared awareness of its own conventions and limitations, that seems to inform recent literature more generally and that can be seen as a decisive move beyond postmodernist disillusion.<sup>89</sup>

According to Huber’s analysis, the novels’ textual characteristics offer plenty of opportunities for a tried and tested reading based on the postmodern ontological and deconstructionist concerns. However, she observes that a shift has taken place that has produced a different type of novels: “fiction that is no longer centrally concerned with unmasking, dissolving, subverting and unsettling, but sets out to gradually displace postmodernism’s fantastic paranoia by attempts to reconstruct, (re-)connect, communicate and engage.”<sup>90</sup> The reconstruction that Huber sees in the novels that she analyses has to do with the possibility of communication and

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<sup>86</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 17.

<sup>87</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 17.

<sup>88</sup> Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism*, 28.

<sup>90</sup> Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism*, 24.

realism. The gesture of reconstruction that sounds similar to my own suggestion for reading from a reparative readerly attitude is focused differently in Huber's case. She does not refer to the debate about the methodology for literary studies, nor does she map the role that the affective turn has played in this debate.

In the main text of her book, Huber convincingly illustrates that the shift is taking place in the novels themselves, but in a footnote she reveals that an attitude assumed to her material influences the conclusions that she draws about the material. She admits wanting to "resist the postmodernist urge of putting terms like reality and truth within quotation marks".<sup>91</sup> This leads her to the following important realization about the influence that her attitude as a reader can have on the conclusions drawn about the texts: "I am cognisant of the fact that my own attitude thus partakes in and indeed contributes to construct the very shift I am describing in the literary texts I study. Such a mutual interaction, I claim, is precisely how all cultural change and development is effected."<sup>92</sup> The examples of Huber's and Holland's partially overlapping sample of novels, their research questions and the differing conclusions that they reach about the prominence or success of postmodern strategies and concerns show the importance of the theorization of reader's attitude within an attempt to interpret contemporary novels. Holland clearly has a high opinion of poststructuralist American novels, appreciates their complexities and nuances but at the same time favours humanist themes that she looks for in the novels and finds them. Huber on the other hand, is rather convinced of the end of postmodernism and the necessity to look beyond it. The way in which these two women have read postmodern novels in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century illustrates a shift in readerly attitude in professional readers. The literary-historiographical shift that we end up perceiving with the benefit of hindsight does not only consist of a change in the formal features of the texts (as I will focus on in chapter 3) but also of a change in the attitude of the readers.

It is not my intention either, to downplay the impact that my attitude and choices as a reader are having on my interpretation of the novels. On the contrary, in chapter 4, I plan to consciously assume different readerly attitudes or, in McHale's or Klein's terms, positions, to the text and observe the difference in interpretation that will result from the oscillation between different attitudes. In this way, I will explore the influence of the text on the reader as well as the

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<sup>91</sup> Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism*, 255.

<sup>92</sup> Huber, *Literature After Postmodernism*, 255.

consequences of the reader's pre-assumed attitude for the interpretation. I am going to work with this factor influencing the interpretation and the conclusions I reach more consciously than Huber or Holland. There is however also something in the text that I study, Maxim Februari's (1963) novel *Klont* (2017) that merits the assumption of such an attitude. Huber is teasing out the neo-realist and fantastic elements out of experimental novels that use predominantly postmodern textual strategies by assuming a reconstructive attitude. The novel that I have chosen to focus on contains two plotlines and narrative situations, one of which invites the assumption of a suspicious, paranoid attitude. The second contains elements that will yield new interpretations when a reparative attitude is assumed.

### 1.3 Debate 3 The affective turn debate

As has been made clear, the legacy of Sedgwick's thought has been taken up in two different debates and contributed to two different research trends. Firstly, to the debates about the future methodology for literary studies which opens up a way for new methodological proposals. Secondly, Sedgwick has contributed to the development of affect theory which has come on the heels of the affective turn in the humanities. It might also be seen as an answer to the question of what methodology literary studies should use after critique has been its dominant methodology for so long. One voice contributing to the third debate leads the way in pointing out how affect theory can be seen as an answer to this question. That voice is Brian Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Massumi considers the turn to affect as a methodological way forward, a way in which he can discover new avenues for thinking and research in cultural theory. Massumi searches for ways to theorize the feeling body in movement in such a way that it can "still be a site of modest acts of 'resistance' or 'subversion' keeping alive the possibility of systemic change."<sup>93</sup> He does this by pitting the body against the subject as defined by cultural theory and therefore, as fully determined and annexed by cultural discourse.

Massumi turns to affect and the body in order to inject considerations of movement and the everyday back into cultural theory that has until that point only considered the body as discursive: "Culture [...] structured the dumb material interactions of things and rendered them legible according to a dominant signifying scheme into which human subjects in the making

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<sup>93</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

were interpellated’.”<sup>94</sup> The discursive body was thus reduced to its “positioning on the grid. The grid was conceived as an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: “male versus female, black versus white, gay versus straight, and so on”.<sup>95</sup> This means that the body in cultural theory was only “a local embodiment of ideology”.<sup>96</sup> The movement of the body from one position to another is what “poststructuralist cultural theory”<sup>97</sup> cannot describe. Massumi wants to build on theory’s insights in “the hope that movement, sensation, and qualities of experience couched in matter [...] might be culturally-theoretically thinkable.”<sup>98</sup> In this sense is *Parables for the Virtual* an experimental form of writing with an experimental goal – striking a new path. Massumi explicitly reflects on this goal, thus supporting my idea that in turning to movement, affect and sensation, as his subtitle announces, he hopes to go beyond the well-trodden paths of cultural theory:

Take joy in your digressions. Because that is where the unexpected arises. That is the experimental aspect. If you know where you will end up when you begin, nothing has happened in the meantime. You have to be willing to surprise yourself writing things you didn’t think you thought.<sup>99</sup>

Moving on from Massumi’s 2002 publication where he strikes a new path, there has been a plethora of overviews of affect theory published since then alongside with works that map the developments of the affective turn. Because affect is a concept that plays an important role in my analyses and because there are many different definitions of affect and ideas about what it is, I need to relate to these existing definitions and perspectives. There have been several surveys and reviews of affect theory, some of which pay closer attention to literature (Barnwell 2020, Houen, 2020) while others focus on the use of the study of affect for social sciences and cultural studies (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Ali 2020). I am going to draw on these sources in order to create a (necessarily incomplete) overview of affect theory with a genealogy of the most important ideas and debates that will help me to place my approach in relation to some of the dominant voices in the field and contextualize it.

In *Critical Affect* (2020), Ashley Barnwell gives an overview of the development of affect theory that by and large corresponds to the account given in *The Affect Theory Reader* published

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<sup>94</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 2.

<sup>96</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 18.

ten years earlier by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth that she draws on for her overview. Both Barnwell and Gregg and Seigworth trace the origin of affect studies back to two pioneers of the field. Affect theory can be traced back to the writings of Silvan Tomkins and Gilles Deleuze. In his introduction to *Affect and Literature* (2020), Alex Houen goes back to possibly the oldest source on affect, Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677) in order to unite what Barnwell and Gregg and Seigworth consider to be two different strands of affect theory with competing and mutually exclusive conceptions of affect.

According to Houen, the split between Tomkins and Deleuze occurs because of different interpretations of Spinoza's monism that does not distinguish between the mind and the body: "Spinoza does not assert that ideas tied to affections and affects arise as secondary cognitive 'abstractions'; instead, as Deleuze puts it, 'Our feelings are in themselves ideas'."<sup>100</sup> This is the reason why Houen questions the split between two different strands of affect theory observed by both Barnwell and Gregg and Seigworth, a split between Tomkins' and Deleuze's conception of affect, or in Houen's terms, "between cognitivists and noncognitivists".<sup>101</sup> Houen conceives of the cognitivists – with whom I want to throw my lot in – in such a way that the work of Martha Nussbaum fits into this category. However, her use of affect and her claims of the ethical power of literature are at a distance from how I want to use affect for the analysis of literary works. I will therefore leave Houen's account aside for now in order to further trace the genealogy of affect theory as it is presented in Barnwell and Gregg and Seigworth.

Shortly before the turn of the millennium, the two main schools of thought of what will become affect theory appear, each drawing on a different source from the writings of the forefathers of affect theory, Tomkins and Deleuze. The founding publications of these two schools within affect theory both appear in the same year, 1995. It is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins" and Brian Massumi's "Autonomy of Affect". Sedgwick and Frank draw on Tomkins' thought, whereas Massumi bases himself on Deleuze's work. What is at stake in the division between these two schools of thought and what is at the same time of high relevance for the study of affect in literature, is the relation between affect and cognition – and by extension, language. Massumi emphasizes that "(i)t is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion"<sup>102</sup> in *Parables for the*

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<sup>100</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (1968, repr. New York: Zone, 1992), 220. Quoted in *Affect and Literature*, edited by Alex Houen (Cambridge University Press: 2020), 6.

<sup>101</sup> *Affect and Literature*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

*Virtual*. Importantly, he defines affect as an intensity and departing from this definition, he contrasts emotion with it:

An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions [...]“<sup>103</sup>.

What I think Massumi means to say in his convoluted phrasing is that emotion is affect processed through cognition, made to signify (by means of language) and claimed by a subject.

When Lara Ali ponders the contribution of affect studies to the social sciences, she emphasizes the infra-empirical nature of affect that is a consequence of Massumi’s qualification of the relation between affect and language:

When affect has been captured and passed to be expressed in the phenomenological realm from which we collect our empirical data, it has already become something else. When affect becomes behavior that you can describe, when it becomes words that you can transcribe and analyze, when it turns into personal experience that you can hear or tell, or an idea that you can express, we are no longer in the presence of affect [...].<sup>104</sup>

Ali and Massumi are making a claim about the impossibility of capturing affect in language. Massumi’s intervention that can be seen as one of the founding texts of the affective turn is reacting to the primacy of “theories of signification”<sup>105</sup> in the methodologies available for humanities. This is how we get to the difference between affect and emotion. Houen claims that whereas “emotion arises as cognitive, ‘named’ structures of feeling that entail ‘the intervention of language’, affects are ‘bodily feelings’ that are resistant to language’.”<sup>106</sup> The definition of affect as resistant to language is of course of great significance to my inquiry into the possibility of the literary text foregrounding affective questions and begs the question whether something like that is even thinkable, given Massumi’s definition. In answering this question, Sandra Moyano Ariza’s article “Affect Theory with Literature and Art: Between and Beyond

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<sup>103</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

<sup>104</sup> Lara Ali, “Mapping Affect Studies,” *Athena Digital* 20, No 2 (July 2020), 4-5.

<sup>105</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Fredric Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 29. Quoted in Houen, *Affect and Literature*, 4.



Representation” can serve as a guide that maps the various possibilities that have been observed in various publications about affect theory in a language-based art form such as literature.

### 1.3.1 Categorization of literary approaches to affect

Moyano Ariza roughly follows Massumi’s distinction between affect and emotion in pointing to two strands in affect theory. For the first group of theoreticians concerned with the intersection between affect and representation that she calls ‘Affect as excess’, “(a)ffect [...] offers a lexicon to expand on the analyses of pre-cognitive processes that lead to emotion in order to open a space to think how these processes are represented in literature and artworks [...].”<sup>107</sup> The idea of affect as excess draws on the distinction between affect and emotion where affect is “of excessive nature [...], understood as *that* which escapes subjectivity, cognition, definition, and therefore, representation.”<sup>108</sup> In the second group, theoreticians consider affect to be a capacity, thus drawing near to Massumi’s definition. As such, focusing “on affect’s autonomous properties, the theories of this group revolve around ontological concerns of affect itself, and they prioritize what affect *is* and *does* more than what it means.”<sup>109</sup> Further on, Moyano Ariza divides the approaches to affect in these two groups into two subsections. The affect as excess group is subdivided into two groups, one that uses affect “to attend to the different affective and cognitive registers of feeling in literary and artworks [...], always evaluating the feelings portrayed in the work as holding meaning.”<sup>110</sup> To relate Moyano Ariza’s division to the earlier mentioned genealogy of affect theory, she mentions Sedgwick and Frank’s 1995 publication as a representative of this methodological strand.

The second subgroup of approaches within the ‘affect as excess’ strand that is referred to as collective affect turns “to literature and art’s representation [...] to trace the histories of feeling and collective affects in our social and political contexts.”<sup>111</sup> The representatives of this group are numerous: Moyano Ariza mentions Sarah Ahmed (2004), Sianne Ngai (both 2005 and 2012) and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, but I could also add Rachel Greenwald Smith’s *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*<sup>112</sup> and Demeyer and Vitse’s *Affectieve*

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<sup>107</sup> Sandra Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art: Between and Beyond Representation,” *Athenea Digital* 20, No 2 (July 2020), 4.

<sup>108</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 4.

<sup>109</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 5.

<sup>110</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 6.

<sup>111</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 6.

<sup>112</sup> Greenwald-Smith’s book from 2015 occupies a liminal position between the two groups, affect as lens and collective affect. Moyano Ariza discusses her in the former, but mentions her affinity with the latter. In my opinion, Greenwald-Smith’s focus on the affective hypothesis as a consequence of neoliberalism makes her use

*crisis, literair herstel*. They take up the insights from cultural studies and critique of representation and apply them to the study of affect.

My approach to affect has much more in common with the first rather than the second subgroup. I do not relate to affect in literature as necessarily complicated by representation based in language, although I do pay attention to an interesting dynamic between language (cognition) and affect when it is depicted in the text, as is demonstrated in the analysis of *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis*. I am aided in this effort, by the approach based on Sedgwick and Frank's work which attempts to develop suitable "vocabulary to speak about intensified forms of emotion and affect in literary works".<sup>113</sup>

Furthermore, my approach to affect in this chapter coincides with a group called 'Affect as lens' by Moyano Ariza in the focus on affect/emotion as meaningful and worthy of close reading and interpretation. Within this group and also in Moyano Ariza's text (as the previous quotation suggests) the theoretical difference between affect and emotion does not play such an important role. By situating my conception of affect in line with this group of researchers, I follow their example in using the term affect for the cognitively processed and individualized intensities, that Massumi and Ali would rather call emotions. The affective dominant, a term that Demeyer and Vitse have coined, should, considering this definition and the fact that its authors depart from the emotional experiences of the characters (expressed in language and pertaining to individuals, despite being illustrative of social problems and greater structures of feeling), perhaps also rather be called the emotional dominant. However, the terminology of the affective dominant is already established, and I am not going to attempt to change it. Moreover, a project concerned with the analysis of affect in literature must resign itself to the necessity that all affects that it will encounter are going to be mediated by language.

One can depart from an analysis of character's affective experiences, as I think both I and Demeyer and Vitse do, however, the results of the analysis can differ widely, depending on whether one draws on the methodology and conception of affect either from the 'affect as lens' group or the 'collective affect' group. Demeyer and Vitse's work with affect is enriched by affect theory on the systemic level where connections between affective experiences of individual characters and the context of neoliberal capitalism are explored. The ideas from

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of affect decidedly more related to Demeyer and Vitse, who also draw on her, than to *Sedgwick, Touching Feeling*, who researches emotion, psychology and desires as holding meaning.

<sup>113</sup> Moyano Ariza, "Affect Theory with Literature and Art," 7.

affect theory that I am going to incorporate in the analysis of characters' affective experience are playing a role on the level of the readerly attitude. This concept plays an important role in the third and fourth chapter. In the latter, readerly attitude is one of the two elements contributing to the formation of the relational frame which I am going to develop as part of the analysis of *Wij zijn licht*. Readerly attitude means that I am letting my affective response influence the analysis, whether through reparative reading or through the relational frame where empathic response is the basis of how a reading self relates to the selves represented in and through the text.

I have now mapped the development of the affective turn as it relates to literature and illuminated the relation of my methodology to already existing approaches. However, a question that has not yet been posed is what the sudden interest in affect, which can be traced back to the 1990s, has brought about. What are we gaining by orienting inquiries in the humanities away from language and towards affect? Michael Hardt asks himself a similar question in the aptly named foreword to Patricia Ticineto Clough's collection of essays "What Are Affects Good For?"<sup>114</sup> I am placing Hardt's question at the end of my theoretical chapter in the hope that it will function as an invitation to the reading of the following three case study chapters where I show several things that the study of literature through the lens of affect is good for. I will return to a more direct answer to the question just raised in the conclusion to the dissertation by using a more theoretical and abstract discourse similar to the one used in this chapter.

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<sup>114</sup> Michael Hardt, "What Are Affects Good For?" In Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean O'Malley, *The Affective Turn; Theorizing the Social*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

## 2. Chapter 2 Oscillation foregrounded: textual movement between innovation and continuity in *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis*

“In relatie met de ander besta je.”<sup>115</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

A choice to analyse one novel from an oeuvre of such a fruitful and respected author as Nelleke Noordervliet, is a difficult choice to defend. How does one say anything meaningful about an author who has been active as a novelist, playwright, essayist and columnist for thirty-five years when one analyses only one novel without having recourse to generalities or without overlooking the variety and diversity of genres, styles and themes that the author has incorporated? Noordervliet debuted in 1987 with the novel *Tine of De dalen waar het leven woont* (Tine, Or The Valleys Where Life Lives<sup>116</sup>) and between that moment and 2022, when she wrote her last novel to date, *Wij kunnen dit* (We Can Do This), she wrote ten other novels. She initially came to be known and is mentioned in academic publications on Dutch literary history as an author of historical fiction. Both *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen* (Evermore Birds Nesting Again) and *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (Dutch Literature, A History) mention her work exclusively in this context. Jaap Goedegebuure writes in the latter publication: “A small revival occurred in the genre of historical fiction at the beginning of the nineties.”<sup>117</sup> He places Noordervliet’s early work (including the 1993 novel *De naam van de vader* (The Name of the Father) among a group of historical fiction writers alongside with P. F. Thomése, Thomas Roosenboom and others. Hugo Brems places Noordervliet in the same context in the former handbook of literary history but mentions her also in the context of “new gals”,<sup>118</sup> a conspicuous group of female authors (such as Kristien Hemmerechts, Charlotte Mutsaers and Tessa de Loo) who debuted in the eighties.

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<sup>115</sup> “It is in relation with the other that you exist.” Lex Bohlmeijer, “Zingeving in de zorg. Susanne Kruys in gesprek met Lex Bohlmeijer”, published 29 June 2019, in *Goede gesprekken*, podcast, 22:30, accessed 31 October, 2022, <https://decorrespondent.nl/9661/patienten-herstellen-beter-als-iemand-naar-ze-luistert-hoe-krijgt-dat-een-plek-in-de-zorg/681030477072-b94a1f57>.

<sup>116</sup> None of Noordervliet’s novels are translated into English, according to the information available on the website of Nederlandse letterenfonds (Dutch Foundation for Literature). I use the English translations of the titles that are available on this website.

<sup>117</sup> “Aan het begin van de jaren negentig beleefde de historische fictie in Nederland een kleine renaissance.” Jaap Goedegebuure, In: Maria Schenkenveld-van der Dussen and Ton Anbeek (red.), *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (Groningen: Nijhoff, 1993), 775.

<sup>118</sup> “Nieuwe meiden.” Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen: geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945-2005*, (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2006), 419.

Most of the academic attention that has been paid to Noordervliet's oeuvre, has been paid to the historical novels,<sup>119</sup> which she has kept on producing on and off throughout her career; the last one was *Vrij Man* (Free Man) from 2012. She has however also written novels that could be placed in the genre of the novel of ideas, such as *Snijpunt*, (Intersection) and *Aan het eind van de dag* (At the End of the Day). This is the genre into which Odile Heynders places both Noordervliet's more recently published novels. Among these she also explicitly names *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* in *Women's Writing in the Low Countries*: "a novel as an exercise in thinking".<sup>120</sup> Heynders sees "the explicit discussion of and philosophizing about humanism"<sup>121</sup> as the most important motif of *Snijpunt*. She discusses *Zonder noorden* as a work that raises "challenging moral questions, uses symbols and [...] allegorical figures"<sup>122</sup> which is a characteristic that, along with the "restrained and always lucid"<sup>123</sup> style "fits in with the novel as idea, as a philosophical experiment and an exhortation to reflect on one's own responsibility."<sup>124</sup> All of this sounds rather cerebral. Generally speaking, the academic critique has therefore mostly paid attention to Noordervliet's historical fiction and when it widened its scope in the choice of discussed novels, it still focused on the more rational, philosophical and idea-based aspects of the novels. My analysis will therefore focus on Noordervliet's work from an angle that has not yet been used. This will test out the presence of affective questions in a work outside of the so far tested corpus, consisting of novels of authors from the millennial generation or those who are slightly older.<sup>125</sup>

The reception of *Zonder noorden* in the newspapers has been varied and divided in its opinion about the quality of the novel. There are reviewers who do not shy from singing the novel's praise through a series of positive attributes: "intriguing and delicate novel",<sup>126</sup> "well-written, entertaining and gripping book".<sup>127</sup> There are however just as many reviewers who were not

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<sup>119</sup> *Lexicon van literaire werken* (Lexicon of Literary Works), contains two entries about Noordervliet's first and third novel (*Tine* and *Het oog van de engel*). Nora van Laar places the latter novel in the same context as Brems and Goedegebuure and defines the novel as having some characteristics of "a philosophical treatise." "Een filosofische verhandeling" (*Lexicon van literaire werken*, 11).

<sup>120</sup> Heynders, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*, 181.

<sup>121</sup> Heynders, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*, 180.

<sup>122</sup> Heynders, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*, 181

<sup>123</sup> Heynders, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*, 181

<sup>124</sup> Heynders, *Women's Writing from the Low Countries*, 181.

<sup>125</sup> See Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 22-27.

<sup>126</sup> "Intrigerende en verrijpende roman." Fleur Speet, "De magneet van het leven", *Financieel Dagblad*, published 21 November 2009, accessed 23 April, 2022.

<sup>127</sup> "Goedgeschreven, boeiende en aangrijpende boek." Els Brussé-Dekker, "Behoeftte aan de pijn van het verlies," *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, published 8 April 2010, accessed 13 April 2022.

happy about *Zonder noorden*: “such a predictable and clichéd story,”<sup>128</sup> “the new Noordervliet could have been better”,<sup>129</sup> “thrilling up to two-thirds”<sup>130</sup> and “the rock bottom of Nelleke Noordervliet’s oeuvre”.<sup>131</sup> I have consulted ten reviews of the novel and out of that number, four were enthusiastic and admiring and four were critical. The diversity of opinions in newspaper-published criticism can be explained by a reference to oscillation between the three different dominants – epistemological, ontological and affective – that characterizes the novel. Each of these dominants focuses on different concerns. For some professional readers this diversity of themes apparently results in a disjointed novel that “is not in all respects evenly well-developed”<sup>132</sup> and whose affectively satisfying ending is “is almost too good.”<sup>133</sup> The relationally and affectively rewarding ending therefore makes a kitschy and too artificial impression on some reviewers, especially seeing that the ending follows on the heels of deeply felt and disorienting feelings of doubt, anger and trauma in the protagonist. Jann Ruyter comments on this aspect of the novel by observing “in that case, there is just too much that is being taken out of the reader’s hands.”<sup>134</sup> because, as Pieter Steinz observes “almost all the loose ends are neatly tied up at the end.”<sup>135</sup> This disunity of the novel combined with the subsequent impression of a too artificial and strongly governed happy-ending can also be explained by means of my methodology combining oscillation with foregrounding of various questions characteristic of various dominants. I will read *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis*, through the concept of oscillation between the epistemological and ontological foregrounded questions which pose, generally speaking, rational issues and affective questions, which focus on affective and/or relational issues.

A couple of reviewers noticed a characteristic of *Zonder noorden* that invites and requires a reading by means of the methodology of oscillation and foregrounding of several questions. The novel contains two interwoven and interconnected plotlines. The first plotline bears resemblance to a detective story. The self-appointed detective is the protagonist, Robert

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<sup>128</sup> “Zo’n voorspelbaar en clichématig verhaal”. Danielle Serdijn, “Sleutelen aan ’t innerlijk kompas,” *de Volkskrant*, published 20 November 2009, accessed 13 April 2022.

<sup>129</sup> “Nieuwe Noordervliet had beter gekund.” Erik De Vries, “Niemand. Iedereen. Alleman,” *Vrij Nederland*, published 14 November 2009, accessed 14 April 2022.

<sup>130</sup> “Spannend tot tweederde.” Pieter Steinz, “Ik had behoefte aan de wond,” *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 November 2009, accessed 13 April 2022.

<sup>131</sup> “Dieptepunt in het oeuvre van Nelleke Noordervliet.” Coen Peppelenbos, “Geen veellezer,” *Leeuwarder Courant*, published 30 October 2009, accessed 14 April 2022.

<sup>132</sup> “Heeft niet aan alle kanten sterke stekels.” Steinz, “Ik had behoefte aan de wond”.

<sup>133</sup> “Bijna te mooi.” Jann Ruyter, “Welke vrouw hoort bij deze huisraad?”, *Trouw*, published 7 November 2009, accessed 12 April, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> “Dan word je als lezer net wat te veel uit handen genomen.” Ruyter, “Welke vrouw hoort bij deze huisraad?”

<sup>135</sup> “Bijna alle losse eindjes worden aan het eind afgehecht.” Steinz, “Ik had behoefte aan de wond”.

Andersen who moves from the Netherlands to a small village called Horn on the west coast of Canada. He rents a house of a woman who has been missing for two years. Robert takes it on himself to investigate the circumstances around the disappearance of Beverly Walker. Behind this first, conspicuous, detective-like plotline, there is another one that slowly but surely reveals that Robert has a trauma in his past that he has not fully processed. His wife Suzanne has been murdered by a burglar, Johnny H.. Robert's remorse, loneliness, fear, rage and vengefulness play an important role in this second plotline; it is in short dominated by feelings that are connected to Robert's attempts to process his trauma and become reconciled with it. He leaves for Horn because he cannot stand the idea that he would encounter Suzanne's murderer, who is going to be able to leave the prison earlier, somewhere in the small country that is the Netherlands. So he flees from Johnny to the other side of the world. He tries to build a new life for himself here, to become a part of the local community and to start a new relationship. Steinz (as well as Ruyters) notices these two plotlines in the following aside: "Robert's research and the self-inquiry that takes place in parallel with it."<sup>136</sup>

The places where these two storylines intersect and influence each other are numerous, so that the reader gradually realizes that Robert's investigation into the cold case is a substitute for the real activity that he is not consciously engaged with and aware of but that is happening incidentally: dealing with his rather explosive pain and finding a way in which he can meaningfully spend the rest of his life without his wife Suzanne. The detective plotline can be seen as foregrounding *epistemological* questions. McHale gives an example of epistemological questions: "What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?"<sup>137</sup> Accordingly, Robert interviews his neighbours in Horn, talks to the local journalist and the police officer with whom he shares his suspicions and insinuations. All these investigative efforts revolve around the questions of knowing and not knowing, guessing, interpreting and information that is either being revealed or concealed, thus foregrounding epistemological uncertainty around the life, disappearance and supposed death of Beverly Walker. Yet the plot of the detective story (according to McHale "the epistemological genre par excellence")<sup>138</sup> is connected and interwoven with an equally central *ontological* uncertainty foregrounded by the existence or non-existence of Beverly. Robert's investigation and the

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<sup>136</sup> "De naspeuringen van Robert, en het zelfonderzoek dat daarmee parallel loopt." Steinz, "Ik had behoefte aan de wond".

<sup>137</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9.

<sup>138</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9.

epistemological questions that he poses: “Oh, what was, after all, the story of Beverly’s life and loves?”<sup>139</sup> can be seen as a reaction to an ontological uncertainty.

The doubtful (non)existence of Beverly is raising questions such as: is Beverly still alive? Does she still exist somewhere in this world? These questions are of the ontological kind because Beverly’s ontological status is uncertain. McHale’s example of ontological questions is more cerebral and literary, but it principally still accords with the questions that Beverly’s disappearance foregrounds: “What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?”<sup>140</sup> According to the Canadian law, Beverly Walker cannot be declared dead until the seventh year since she has gone missing. Robert’s investigation draws attention to this otherwise inconspicuous motif by making the ontological uncertainty into the spark that lights up his obsession for more knowledge and more information about Beverly. Robert finds the richest source of information close to home in the end. He discovers Beverly’s documents that remained in the house she owned: photos, sketches and letters. Robert’s tendency to gather all the information can be likened to a process of equipping himself with epistemological weapons to combat the ontological questions caused by the uncertainty around Beverly’s existence. In the course of this process, he becomes aware of and is tortured by the dubiousness of the conclusions based on his interpretations. In the spirit of the foregrounding of epistemological questions, he becomes confronted with the impossibility and inaccessibility of an objective judgment or truth.

The detective plotline thus clearly contains both epistemological and ontological questions. There is however also the less conspicuous plotline in which Robert attempts to deal with the trauma of his wife’s murder, the hole that it has left in his life and a general sense of aimlessness. This plotline foregrounds affect because it shows the protagonist in the process of coming to terms with a past that he is ashamed of, being consumed by feelings of revenge, fear and cynicism and with remorse about the disappearing memories of his wife. The affective questions are defined by Demeyer and Vitse as follows: “‘how can I feel reality (myself, the other, the past, the present, etc.)?’; ‘how can I feel to belong to reality?’; ‘how can I feel reality to be real?’”<sup>141</sup> Applied to the less conspicuous plotline of *Zonder noorden* dealing with Robert’s private life, this foregrounds questions like: How will Robert process his trauma? How

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<sup>139</sup> “Ach wat was toch het verhaal van Beverly’s leven en liefdes?” Noordervliet, 152.

<sup>140</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, “De affectieve dominant: een ideologiekritische lezing van recent Nederlandstalig proza,” *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 134, No. 3 (2018), 220.



can he become reconciled with the way in which his life and his family's life were influenced by a crime? What direction will he give to the rest of his life? As the plotlines with very different content and aim develop, the reader realizes that Robert's investigation into the cold case is a substitution for his real concern; the processing of his trauma, which happens incidentally: "This place was chosen as a temporary exile, where I would exorcise the demon of Johnny H., not bring Beverly Walker back to life."<sup>142</sup> This is one of the few places in the novel where it is made explicitly clear that the research into the case Walker and Robert's private memories of Suzanne and Johnny are related. Generally speaking, the two plotlines therefore foreground sometimes two, in some places even all three questions that define the epistemological, ontological and affective dominant.

### 2.1.1 Methodological sketch: oscillation and foregrounding

Because of the interconnectedness of the dominant questions and the textual signals that foreground them and because of my wish to map the continuities in literary historiography, *Zonder noorden* cannot be meaningfully described by looking for one single principle or concept that would capture and describe all the aspects of the novel. Neither is an account based on a periodizing frame suitable because such an account contributes to falling into the methodological traps of periodizing approaches, such as emphasis on innovation at the expense of continuities. The interconnected subplotlines and the interdependence of the issues discussed in them makes analysing *Zonder noorden* in terms of a unidirectional shift beyond postmodernism described in most obituaries of postmodernism impossible. The textual signals of the novel do not support this idea. The rather structuralist and autonomy-based use of foregrounding that I apply in this chapter makes it possible to analyse the novel with regard to the question of periodisation without having recourse to some more specific topic, such as the use of irony in postmodern novels.<sup>143</sup>

The first conceptual tool that accounts for continuities instead of breaks between periods, is *oscillation*. Oscillation is central to Van den Akker and Vermeulen's conception of a new period beyond postmodernism, which they call metamodernism. They define it as follows: "metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern."<sup>144</sup> In this quotation from

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<sup>142</sup> "Deze plek was gekozen als tijdelijk ballingsoord om de duivel Johnny H. uit te drijven, niet om Beverly Walker tot leven te wekken." Nelleke Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* (Amsterdam: Augustus, 2009), 124.

<sup>143</sup> See for comparison Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016) and Doyle, "The Changing Face of Post-Postmodern Fiction".

<sup>144</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen "Notes on Metamodernism," 60.

the 2010 article that has launched the term metamodernism – repeated in the introduction to *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* – metamodernism is proposed as a successor to postmodernism. The conception of Van den Akker and Vermeulen thus also shows some signs of the periodizing framework. This focus on a break is however outweighed by a particular characteristic of metamodernism: the unceasing pendular movement of oscillation: “One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles.”<sup>145</sup>

Because Van den Akker and Vermeulen define oscillation as a structure of feeling governing all cultural production since approximately the year 2000, for the purposes of literary critique, we need a different tool. This is where the second concept comes in, that I need in order to be able to apply oscillation to the considerably smaller-scale and more detailed level of individual novels: *foregrounding*. This is a principle by means of which the dominant question posed by a literary text can be described and that is at work on the level of the text. I am going to use foregrounding as a method for textual analysis to find out what questions are being provoked by a given textual signal. Here, my approach is in dialogue with another account of contemporary literature that departs from a break with postmodernism: the 2018 article “De affectieve dominant. Een ideologiekritische lezing van recent Nederlandstalig proza” by Demeyer and Vitse. In this article, they suggested that contemporary literature is governed by the affective dominant. According to Demeyer and Vitse, the aesthetic shift beyond postmodernism moves from the ontological questions observed in postmodern novels to affective questions foregrounded by contemporary literature. The observation about postmodern novel being governed by the ontological dominant first introduced in Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* that Demeyer and Vitse depart from, reveals the influence of McHale’s use of dominant, as when an affective dominant is introduced by the Dutch literary critics.

At each formal feature or passage from the novel, I ask myself what question or problematization a given textual feature most urgently poses. The main question posed by a literary text does not have to be foregrounded only based on themes but also by means of formal features. From the perspective of literary historiography, there is one problematic consequence of the structuralist influence within McHale’s and to a lesser extent of Demeyer and Vitse’s use of the dominant. Because structuralism is seeking unity, the idea is that the dominant governs

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<sup>145</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen “Notes on Metamodernism,” 62.

all aspects of the literary text. The consequence of this methodology for the literary-historiographical perspective is that there when all aspects have to be governed by one dominant question, attention cannot be paid to continuity with regard to other questions. I resolve this problem in my first chapter by making oscillation between several dominant questions the issue that is being foregrounded in *Zonder noorden*.

The concept of foregrounding makes me zoom in on the textual signals that draw attention to the aspects of the novel where the oscillating dynamic between epistemological, ontological and affective questions is especially interesting or complicated. The textual signals that foreground oscillation are the plotline in the first section of the chapter, the representation of consciousness in the second section and in the third section, motif and intertextuality. All these textual signals foreground often two, sometimes even three questions at the same time. The foregrounded issues are therefore interconnected, and the interpretative task of this chapter will be to describe the movements between them through the concept of oscillation. By means of these formal and thematic characteristics of the text, I am going to point out the specific continuities between previous dominants or periodic concepts and draw conclusions on the literary historiographical level. The reason for this is that the analysis of *Zonder noorden* connects to the first debate to which this dissertation contributes, namely the debate about periodization.

## 2.2 Interconnected plotlines: oscillating between epistemological, ontological and affective questions

The way in which the interconnected plotlines foreground several dominant questions at the same time can clearly be seen in chapter 44, where, in a condensed form, various important developments of the two plotlines intersect, are resolved, or significantly pushed along. The chapter concludes the detective plotline concerned with foregrounding Robert's investigation into Beverly's life and assumed death governed by epistemological questions. It also however sets the stage for the subsequent processing of Robert's emotions caused by the death of his wife, his remorse about some aspects of his life and his revengefulness against Johnny. First, I will discuss the parts of the chapter that are connected to the results of Robert's investigation. After that, I focus on how the chapter contributes to the development of the affective plotline.

Robert experiences the greatest epistemological uncertainty and doubt when the community in Horn reacts to, and processes new facts about Beverly. Based on his nosing around in her documentation, he finds out about her complicated relationship with her sister, which he leaks

to the community in Horn via Jane Miller, the local journalist. In an interview that appears in the local newspaper, he reveals that Beverly has been the sister of the late Sarah Molyneux, a well-known TV presenter who has died of cancer in the nineties. The board of the local heritage centre, which Beverly has founded with some others, uses this information to name the centre after Sarah and Beverly's maiden names: "the Sinner centre for the history of Horn and environs".<sup>146</sup> At this moment, on an occasion of public gathering during the opening of the heritage centre, the freedom that Robert has had until now to interpret Beverly's life and to come to his own conclusions in his investigation, is taken out of his hands when the board announces their interpretation of the relationship between the sisters by uniting them in the naming ceremony. Beverly is in this way posthumously given a role and a place in the social fabric of the village community. The board offers a positive interpretation of the relationship between the sisters and thus formalizes and anchors this interpretation of the memory of Beverly in the heads and the hearts of the villagers.

Robert has been looking for an answer to his epistemological question: who was Beverly and what happened to her? He was expecting to find it by working with the epistemological tools that could provide him with knowledge: doing research in the form of interviews, reading online, looking at archival documents (Beverly's correspondence). The board of the heritage centre is however offering mainly a relational and, for the community, an affectively satisfying answer. 'This is who Beverly was to us,' says the board's announcement: a founder of the heritage centre and a sister of a TV celebrity. The interpretation of Beverly's life that the board offers is so positive and satisfying that it almost borders on a cliché. In his commentary on this, even the sceptical Robert cannot but feel a certain satisfaction as he digests the announcement: "Everything always turned out just fine here. All stories became part of the tapestry. Each thread got its colour and location in the tissue [...] And Beverly was part of it. Very much so!"<sup>147</sup> She is now no longer the great unknown. On the contrary, through the decision of the board, she becomes a character in the story of the village, her role in the life of the community is interpreted and she is given a place in the collective memory. Robert's reaction to this is initially an acceptance of the interpretation given by the board of the heritage center: "Beverly has reached her destination. The village has given form to her memory. [...] The sisters have been reunited.

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<sup>146</sup> "Het Sinner-centrum voor de geschiedenis van Horn en omstreken." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 216.

<sup>147</sup> "Alles kwam hier altijd goed. Alle verhalen werden in het tapijt geweven. Elke draad kreeg zijn kleur en plaats in het weefsel. [...] Maar Beverly zat erin. En hoe!" Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 219.

[...] The vase has been glued together. All's well that ends well."<sup>148</sup> However, because in his investigation, Robert was looking for a differently oriented answer, this one does not satisfy him. Moreover, based on the documents in his house, especially Sarah Molyneux' letter to her sister, Robert knows that the sisters themselves probably would not be filled with joy about the connection between them and the interpretation of their relationship which the heritage centre's new name suggests. Their relationship was more complicated and more embittered than the board knows. At this point of the novel, the uncertainty about the true interpretation foregrounds an epistemological question based on the contrast between what the reader knows about the relationship between Sarah and Beverly and the positive, public interpretation of the board.

Apart from a partial denouement of the detective story plotline, chapter 44 significantly accelerates Robert's processing of affective questions. Throughout the novel, Robert is plagued by doubt and uncertainty about his relationship with Suzanne: he considers it a great loss, when he realizes that he no longer remembers her voice, her smell. With these memories fading away, he begins doubting the strength and quality of their relationship, which had always been plagued by his fear that she would leave him. In this passage, he is trying to convince himself of the strength and durability of their bond preserved in the memories even after her death:

The memories, the real memories were incommunicable. [...] All the cells in my body had renewed themselves since Suzanne's death, but they passed their knowledge on. I was trying to persuade myself. She is just as she had been. I know how she has been. I know how we were. [...] But I was scared. I did not trust my memories anymore.<sup>149</sup>

In this situation, Robert's mistrust in his memories touches on an even deeper doubt - that he has never known, appreciated or loved his wife enough when she was still alive. The epistemological doubt also encroaches upon the affective and relational aspects of Robert's life. This is therefore a moment of oscillation between the epistemological and affective questions, a dynamic we will see frequently throughout the analysis of this novel.

At the barbecue in front of the heritage centre, where the announcement of its new name cements the place that Beverly has been given in the collective memory of the village, the

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<sup>148</sup> "Beverly heeft haar bestemming gevonden. Het dorp heeft de herinnering aan haar vormgegeven. [...] De zusters zijn samengebracht. [...] De vaas is gelijmd. Eind goed, al goed." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 218.

<sup>149</sup> "De herinneringen, de echte herinneringen waren ondeelbaar. [...] Sinds Suzannes dood hadden al mijn lichaamcellen zich vernieuwd maar hun kennis van haar doorgegeven. Ik prentte het mezelf in. Ze is nog zoals ze was. Ik weet hoe ze was. Ik weet hoe we waren. [...] Maar ik was bang. Ik vertrouwde mijn herinneringen niet meer." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 142.

appearance of Robert's dead wife Suzanne as a projection does the same for his memories of her. This results in Robert being emotionally relieved and able to process his intense and complicated feelings and doubts caused by his memories of her. In contrast to the public announcement by the board that resolves the epistemological questions around Beverly, Robert uses private and personal means (imagination) to resolve affective questions. His affective doubts become stilled by his encounter with Suzanne. It is a memory of her that is presented by the novel as embodied – when she speaks, Robert feels her breath in his ear and she opens the door of his car and nudges him out. The appearance of what could be seen as a ghost is one of the few unrealistic elements in the novel that otherwise does not breach the bounds of realism. However, it is presented with the highest possible degree of realism, by making Robert's projection assume very human and embodied characteristics.

The appearance of an embodied projection or memory of Suzanne, something that does not exist, but that Robert experiences bodily as being there, could lead to a foregrounding of ontological doubt in the form of a questioning of the fictional status of the world presented in the novel in accordance with one of McHale's questions characterizing the ontological dominant of postmodernism: "What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?"<sup>150</sup> There are however too few such moments in the novel that one could conclude that the novel is governed by the ontological dominant of postmodernism. The novel situates this moment of ontological doubt in such a context (Robert coming to terms with his relationship to Suzanne) that it is the affective question that is foregrounded here rather than ontological one. Such a moment must therefore be characterized as an instance of oscillation between the ontological and affective questions.

The same textual element, Suzanne's appearance, could foreground an affective question and thus be preparatory and necessary step for the denouement of the plotline. The Suzanne that materializes for Robert is an idealized version, endowed with her most loving and supportive feelings towards him. The fact that the manifestation of the ghost-Suzanne does not lead to considerations of the breach of the illusion of a fictional world is caused by the natural and realistic way in which she appears in the story world. It is almost as if Robert is being addressed by a good friend accosting him during the party in front of the heritage centre:

Someone tapped me on my shoulder and whispered in my ear that I was exaggerating.  
Suzanne. My beautiful, blonde Suzanne. [...] Her breath in my ear warmed me up. [...]

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<sup>150</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 10.

‘I am with you,’ she said, ‘all the days of your life.’ ‘I know’, I said. ‘Well, what’s holding you back then?’ ‘She’s afraid of me.’ ‘She hears you calling’ ‘She’s got Mike.’ ‘She might want you.’ ‘I don’t want to betray you.’ ‘You cannot lose me now. I am with you all the days of your life.’ She opened the car door and gave me a nudge.<sup>151</sup>

In his imaginary conversation with the ghost, Robert processes several of his fears and uncertainties, that have been plaguing him throughout the novel. His imaginary wife assures him that the difficult parts of their relationship embittered by his mistrust and jealousy, do not have to stand in the way of a positive and loving interpretation of their life together. This is of course an instance of wishful thinking in Robert. A reading informed by the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion could easily discredit it as a fantasy. From this point of view, the use of the word fantasy would point to the object of the fantasy not being real. In other words, the ontological status of the fantasy would be in question. However, if the affective and relational aspects of the fantasy are taken into consideration, fantasy can also be seen as a resource through which Robert can process his emotions and reconcile himself with his loss. During the imagined exchange with his wife, Robert resolves his implicit feeling of betraying Suzanne by pursuing Jane. Suzanne thus gives her blessing to this new relationship that is going to be important for Robert’s life going forward.

All in all, the appearance of Suzanne as a ghost foregrounds various issues in chapter 44: the ontological question about the manner in which the fictional world exists and the affective questions where Robert resolves his personal doubts, remorse and uncertainties relating to his marriage. Both are being connected by oscillation. This oscillating movement foregrounded in chapter 44 departs from epistemological uncertainty caused by the opposition between the public interpretation of Beverly’s life offered by the board and the private conclusions Robert reaches based on her correspondence. Later, the appearance of Suzanne’s embodied projection moves us in the direction of ontological uncertainty. This is however not sufficiently foregrounded by a combination with other elements of the novel’s text to assume the position of a dominant. The conclusion that I am drawing from this analysis of interconnected textual signals foregrounding several interconnected issues is not which one is ultimately the dominant

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<sup>151</sup> “Iemand tikte me op mijn schouder en fluisterde in mijn oor dat ik me aanstelde. Suzanne. Mijn mooie, blonde Suzanne. [...] Haar adem in mijn oor verwarmde me. [...] ‘Ik ben bij je,’ zei ze, ‘alle dagen van je leven.’ ‘Dat weet ik,’ zei ik. ‘Nou, wat houdt je dan tegen?’ ‘Ze is bang voor me.’ ‘Ze hoort je roepen.’ ‘Ze heeft Mike.’ ‘Misschien wil ze jou.’ ‘Ik wil je niet verraden.’ ‘Je raakt me nu niet meer kwijt. Ik ben bij je, alle dagen van je leven.’ Ze deed het portier open en gaf me een zetje.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 214.

one, but that innovation (the affective questions dominating contemporary novels can be seen in this way) and continuities (the epistemological and ontological questions) are inextricably linked by the oscillating movement. From the literary historiographical point of view, oscillation is therefore a way to zoom in on and keep track of the continuities between periods on the level of the literary text.

The oscillatory movement that I have traced throughout the whole chapter 44 is shown to be what is being foregrounded not only by the larger textual units such as chapters, but also to operate in smaller units of text, on the level of paragraphs, for instance within the space of five sentences which appear in chapter 45, in the aftermath of the barbecue party. The act of naming the heritage centre after the Sinner sisters influences Robert's investigation that now must negotiate a great epistemological doubt. He finds himself in a dilemma: what should he do about the difference between the affectively and relationally satisfying interpretation of the board on the one hand and his own, more bleak, conclusions based on the documents found in his house on the other?

I was the only person in the village who knew the story; I was free to rewrite it as I pleased. To wipe it out. To change everything. I had the power  
to write Johnny H. out of my life. To destroy him with my vigorous ability to love and to heal.<sup>152</sup>

The exaggerated reliance on knowledge and information expressed by the first three sentences of the quotation before the indent is typical for Robert's reaction to the initial impulse for his investigation, namely the ontological doubt about Beverly's existence. In spite of the confrontation with the two widely different interpretations of Beverly's legacy and her role in the community, he still believes that the strategy of studying and interpreting sources and archival documents will help him to reach a conclusive answer. Perhaps this is a professional bias, Robert is after all a journalist. His attitude illustrated by the emphasis on power still expresses his belief in the epistemological weapons with which he was planning to confront the ontological doubt. By means of the inconclusively resolved plotline of investigation into Beverly's death, the text of the novel is again moving away from foregrounding an epistemological uncertainty to foregrounding affective uncertainty, in this case with regard to

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<sup>152</sup> "In het dorp kende alleen ik het verhaal; het stond me vrij het te herschrijven. Ongedaan te maken. Alles te veranderen. Ik had de macht

Johnny H. uit mijn leven schrijven. Hem vernietigen met mijn vitale vermogen tot liefde en herstel." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 220.



the issue of how Robert is going to confront the trauma he incurred by Suzanne's murder. With respect to this, it is telling that the fourth sentence of the quotation, with the enjambement, represents through typography that Robert's thinking gets rerouted. His realization of his power over the collective interpretation of Beverly's life (gained by obtaining information no one else in Horn has access to) is suddenly channelled in a different direction.

It is as if Robert's realization of the power gained through information forms the most extreme point of the oscillating movement (the epistemological pole) of an imaginary pendulum. When this point is reached, the pendulum is drawn by another pole: the need for a personal, affective resolution and a processing of traumatic experience. The oscillating movement is expressed through the typography representing the break in Robert's thoughts where his attention is redirected towards his private, affective problem. A possible interpretation of this connection between epistemology and affect is that Robert's preoccupation with various epistemological questions caused by the ontological doubt around Beverly's existence is a substituting activity for his real concern. The affective and relational questions therefore function as a hummus-layer out of which the epistemological doubts grow, fed by the ontological doubt functioning as fertilizer.

The sudden turn to affective concerns in this quotation can be seen as an instance of oscillation. The interconnectedness of the textual signals foregrounding the various questions and the interconnectedness of the questions themselves makes it difficult to reach a final conclusion about this novel by means of the instrument of foregrounding. With regard to the literary historiographical level from which we have departed that carries the question of continuities between postmodern and contemporary novels along, we can now conclude that what the textual signal plotline seems to be foregrounding is oscillation between the already identified dominant questions rather than *one* dominant question. What therefore seems to be dominant for this contemporary novel is the continuity itself, expressed by means of oscillation. Let us now look at a different textual signal to see whether this preliminary conclusion will be confirmed.

### 2.3 Representation of consciousness: oscillating between affect and rationality

The following textual signal that this chapter will focus on is representation of consciousness in two different scenes from the novel. The textual signal that foregrounds oscillation is in both scenes the inner process of consciousness in the protagonist and narrator Robert. The reader has access to the fictional world of *Zonder noorden* only and exclusively through his thoughts,

perceptions and feelings. He is an extra- and homodiegetic narrator who also focalizes everything throughout the text. This time around, there are always only two poles of the oscillating dynamic in these scenes, so it is less complicated than in the previous section of this chapter. The representation of Robert's consciousness is characterized by an oscillation between rationality and affect. Generally speaking, ontological and epistemological questions (about knowledge and existence) can be characterized as rational, with affective concerns standing in opposition to this. In *Zonder noorden*, however, both types of questions bear witness to the dynamic between rationality and affect as it was described by Spinoza;<sup>153</sup> the rational and affective questions are again interconnected. This is why it is worthwhile to look more closely at the dynamics and the oscillating movement. The textual characteristics of the novel pose the question of causality and primacy of affect and rationality and illustrate the interplay by means of oscillation which thus becomes foregrounded.

The ambiguity of the novel is not caused by two different directions of causality. The question that the text poses by representing both types of the oscillating dynamic is: in what phase of the process of cognition does affect appear? Is affect a reaction to an impasse of rationality that surfaces when cognition reaches a dead end? Or is it the subconscious source of thought and action that gets processed and eventually expressed in language, cognition and action? The novel contains scenes that illustrate both types of the dynamic, thus foregrounding oscillation again and choosing not to choose. Oscillation is in *Zonder noorden* thereby characterized by the same unceasing movement as in Van den Akker and Vermeulen's original conception.<sup>154</sup> Regarding causality, the two types of oscillation illustrated by means of two different scenes are, firstly, that affect appears as a reaction to an impasse of rationality. The rational subject moves beyond the epistemological questions caused by the developments in modernity and encounters ontological doubt in the form of a critical reaction and an intensifying scepticism with regard to the possibility of finding satisfying epistemological answers. Thus, the subject enters the realm of ontological questioning. This radical ontological doubt causes the arrival of affect on the scene.

### 2.3.1 Affect as a consequence of the impasse of cognition

Affect emerges as a reaction to an impasse of rationality in the following scene. Robert is confronted with the boundaries of (his) knowledge, with lack of information and doubt about

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<sup>153</sup> See Chapter 1, debate 3 of this dissertation for the role of Spinoza's writing as the earliest source of reflection on affect and a conception of affect that unites thinking and feeling.

<sup>154</sup> See Van den Akker and Vermeulen, "Notes on Metamodernism," 61, 67.

the right interpretation of the information that he has got during his investigation into the case Beverly Walker: “These dry, barren pages with their statements and confessions lacked the context that brought them to life, they were missing the voice.”<sup>155</sup> This brings him to a cognitive dead end. In such moment despair surfaces as an affective reaction to this impasse of thinking and he doubts the meaningfulness of his attempt to reconstruct Beverly’s life’s story and the sense of the whole investigative project. The despair that Robert expresses here, as he attempts to contend with the epistemological puzzle represented by Beverly’s letters and documentation, is reminiscent of one of Moyano Ariza’s categorizations of various uses and conception of affect. This scene in *Zonder noorden* is “taking affect as excessive”<sup>156</sup> understanding “affect as linked to cognitive processes”.<sup>157</sup> Affect is that which is in excess of cognition, that which escapes it. Moyano Ariza is connecting the approach to affect grouped under ‘affect as excess’ “as continuation of the poststructuralist and deconstructivist concern with excess”.<sup>158</sup> Again, the way in which Noordervliet represents affect in this novel is one of the ways in which the continuity with postmodernism works through in the text.

A moment later, Robert manages to break through a sense of impasse to find some worth in his attempt to concern himself with the case nonetheless: “I could add Beverly’s true story to the stories of the village at the end of my reconstruction. I would describe how the tissue that formed the community came to be.”<sup>159</sup> Based on these two quotations, it is clear that Robert’s thoughts about his role in Beverly’s life and in the local community are changing. The more Robert finds out about Beverly, the more he doubts the meaningfulness of his undertaking and his role in it: “I was the voyeur, the snoop, intruder, I trod with my great big Dutch feet on Beverly’s secret soul.”<sup>160</sup> The following passage is an echo of Robert’s earlier quoted idea about the addition of Beverly’s story to the stories of the community which he now disdains:

How daring, the idea that I could contribute to the story of the community, that I should play a role. [...] The truth could never be found and did not need to be found. Was there ever anyone who got wiser by knowing the truth? The truth, you say? Put it down over

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<sup>155</sup> “Deze dorre, droge papieren met hun mededelingen en ontboezemingen misten de context die ze tot leven bracht, ze misten de stem.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 122.

<sup>156</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 4.

<sup>157</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 4-5.

<sup>158</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 4.

<sup>159</sup> “Aan het eind van de reconstructie kon ik Beverly’s ware verhaal toevoegen aan de verhalen van het dorp. [...] Ik zou beschrijven hoe het weefsel tot stand kwam dat de gemeenschap vormde.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 122.

<sup>160</sup> “Ik was de voyeur, de luistervink, de indringer, ik trapte met mijn grote Hollandse poten op de geheime ziel van Beverly.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 122.

there, we can have a look at it for a bit, when we find the time and later, we'll toss it out behind the rhododendrons.<sup>161</sup>

This is a moment of deep and fundamental doubt about the meaning and worth of each human life and life's story. In this phase, the ontological critique and the accompanying doubt about being is so deep that there are no rational solutions available as an answer to or a way out of the doubt. When a deconstructive, suspicious phase of critical thinking is reached, there is no possibility to use rationality to arrive at answers.

Robert has a strong affective reaction to this moment of doubt about the possibility to attain the truth: "I could not breathe. I wanted to take a deep breath but the air got stuck. [...] A case of hyperventilation. I was familiar with it. It made me angry to no end to be so completely a victim to fear."<sup>162</sup> The affective reaction of panic can be connected to the doubt about the sense and meaningfulness of every human endeavour. The anxiety that causes Robert to have such a strong physical reaction is evoked by doubt about the possibility to discover the truth and ascertain the value of the endeavour of searching for it. His panic is caused by being confronted with the possibility that the striving for a meaningful narrative would not have any worth. Robert may hold cynical speeches such as this question that he poses to Jane: "how much do we actually matter to each other?"<sup>163</sup> The involuntary affective reaction that he has to this idea however reveals a deeper desire or need for meaningfulness that can be unearthed under his endeavour of the investigation into Beverly's disappearance. When the option that this desire or need would be unmet becomes real, Robert's reaction is affective and intense. The text keeps silent on Robert's speculations about the search for the truth of Beverly's story on the following two pages after this affective short-circuiting. These scenes represent the first type of dynamic of oscillation where affect surfaces as a reaction to an impasse arrived at by an extreme intensification of rational (epistemological and ontological) doubt.

### 2.3.2 Cognitive processing of affect in language

The second time that affect appears in connection with the doubts about the investigation into Beverly's life demonstrates that affect is not only a reaction to an impasse of rationality but that

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<sup>161</sup> "Wat een gotspe, het idee dat ik iets kon bijdragen aan het verhaal van de gemeenschap, dat ik een rol moest spelen. [...] De waarheid was nooit te achterhalen en hoefde niet achterhaald te worden. Wie werd wijzer van de waarheid? De waarheid, zegt u? Legt u daar maar neer, we zullen er wel even naar kijken als we tijd hebben en hem dan achter de rododendrons flikkeren." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 124.

<sup>162</sup> "Ik kreeg het benauwd. Ik wilde diep ademen, maar de lucht bleef steken. [...] Een aanval van hyperventilatie. Die had ik wel meer gehad. Het ergerde me mateloos zo ten prooi te zijn aan angst." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 125.

<sup>163</sup> "Wat kunnen wij elkaar eigenlijk schelen?" Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 180.

it has existence prior to cognition. On the one hand, as demonstrated by the previous scene, affect is represented as a reaction to cognitive processes in *Zonder noorden*. On the other hand, there are other scenes that suggest that affect exists also outside of and prior to rational processes and conscious thought. The scene that illustrates this second type of oscillation concerns a later phase of Robert's investigation when he has come to know more about Beverly. Moreover, he has also learned about her relationship with her sister, Sarah. The research based on Beverly's documents becomes more and more a confrontation with his own past for Robert. The research forces him to reflect on his own life and his relationship with Suzanne. He has to come to terms with his remorse about several aspects of their relationship. When he reads a letter from Sarah to Beverly, he becomes painfully conscious of how selectively he remembers his marriage with Suzanne: "To remember is to select and selection is a strategy that does not always serve the truth."<sup>164</sup> The following quotation is another instance where both the investigative and the trauma-processing plotlines intersect:

I became curious about the clippings, theatre programs and pages of notes and whatever else it was that the nephew or Beverly herself had thrown into the box inscribed with various. What could I learn from that? As I was stretching my hand out for the not yet inspected material, I hesitated. My arm became heavy. Something surfaced in my head, and behind it I saw the unplastered wall of a thought that I had wanted to keep covered, of a memory that I had wanted to keep buried. And something in the letter from Sarah to Beverly made it happen. I did not know what. What did I want with these two sisters? Where was there a connection between their story and mine? For fuck's sake! Fuck Beverly, fuck Sarah, fuck Johnny H.! What's keeping me from booking a return flight, giving the Canadian spruces the finger and going back home?<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> "Herinneren is selecteren, en selecteren is een strategie die niet altijd de waarheid dient." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 165.

<sup>165</sup> "Ik werd benieuwd naar de knipsels, theaterprogramma's en bladen met aantekeningen of wat het dan ook was dat de neef of Beverly zelf in de doos met varia had geworpen. Wat kon ik daaruit nog te weten komen? Terwijl ik mijn hand uitstreekte naar het nog niet bekeken materiaal, aarzelde ik. Mijn arm werd zwaar. Er was een tegeltje losgeraakt in mijn hoofd. Daarachter zag ik de ruwe muur van een gedachte die ik toegedekt wilde houden, van een herinnering die ik weg wilde stoppen. En iets in de brief van Sarah aan Beverly had dat bewerkstelligd. Ik wist niet wat. Wat had ik met die zussen te maken? Waar sloot mijn verhaal op dat van hen aan? Godverdomme! Fuck Beverly, fuck Sarah, fuck Johnny H.! Wat lette me om een terugvlucht te boeken, de Canadese sparren de middelvinger voor te houden, en terug te gaan naar huis?" Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 168.

In the second scene, the affect that surfaces is anger and aggression expressed by means of several swearwords. The passage illustrates the second route of affect and shows that the order of the oscillating dynamic between affect and rationality has switched.

The anger that takes over Robert's thinking functions as a defensive mechanism against another affect – the pain of a realization or the surfacing of an unpleasant and negative memory that places him in a bad light (the precise content of the memory is unclear at that moment). Robert realizes an ugly truth about the nature of his and Suzanne's relationship and becomes vicariously angry with Sarah, Beverly and Johnny. The painful history of the sisters confronts him with his own unresolved and problematic past. The intense affect (anger) cannot immediately be bypassed to uncover what is the real affective source of the reaction. The trauma cannot be processed, integrated and expressed quickly. It is only at night that follows this fit of rage, that Robert has had the time to realize what the anger is a reaction to and admit it to himself. The difficulty and slowness of the process by means of which affect is transformed into an expressible, cognitively approachable and individualized emotion is expressed by means of the, at this point, still vague and mysterious reference: "something surfaced in my head."<sup>166</sup>

Only after the pause does the novel attempt a representation of the affect that is a source of Robert's angry reaction by means of language, namely through a dream. This is where the reader has the chance to realize that the anger has only been a vicarious affect. Robert's dream of Suzanne who is walking away from him and does not turn around despite him calling her has a different affective charge. The dream can be interpreted as Robert's subconscious that is processing the problematic memory of his life with Suzanne. The affective charge of the dream is clearly fear, Robert is afraid that Suzanne will leave him. Later that night, this interpretation is confirmed by another memory of Robert's, this time one where Suzanne's father warns him of Suzanne's free spirit and independence: "Don't delude yourself, son. She comes and she goes whenever she pleases. She's free."<sup>167</sup> Behind the shameful memory of how he had behaved to his wife which has surfaced during his reading of Sarah's letter that has caused the vicarious affect of anger, there is something else hidden. It is fear of being abandoned.

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<sup>166</sup> "Er was een tegeltje losgeraakt in mijn hoofd." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 168.

<sup>167</sup> "Maak je geen illusies, jongen. Ze gaat, ze komt, wanneer zij dat wil. Ze is vrij." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 170.

“The atmosphere of the dream was still with me, but it remained impalpable. I was looking for words that would help me to put my finger on the emotion and tame it.”<sup>168</sup> It is only after Robert has processed the elusive atmosphere of the dream that the fear-inducing memory and feeling can be communicated to the reader:

‘To remember is to select’ The sentence shot through me like a lightning strike and echoed, three, four, five times. Yes, Sarah, now I know. It’s as if I had known it this whole time. It’s as if I had not known that I looked at the coat rack every time I came home. And always wanted to know where she went, where she was. I was controlling her. Until she got mad about it. ‘You’re watching over me! You are my husband, not my jailor.’ She was right. I promised to do better. I did my best. It went well. Was it going well?<sup>169</sup>

Here, Robert realizes that his controlling attitude towards Suzanne was caused by fear of losing her. He now feels shame when he thinks about his jealousy and how, under its influence, he has reacted to Suzanne’s death: “I felt relief for an instant, standing there at Suzanne’s body. Now she would not go anywhere. Now she would not be able to leave me anymore.”<sup>170</sup> This second scene shows that the processing of trauma that causes intense affects requires time and space which is expressed and represented in the novel by means of pauses and dreams. The intense affective experience of the panic attack in the first scene discussed within this section is followed by a short silence on the topic of meaningfulness of Robert’s endeavour to investigate the documents that Beverly has left behind. In the second scene, the protagonist needs a series of dreams and memories before he can get in touch with what is the source of his affective reaction and for these to be able to be represented in language.

The second scene that I have just analyzed is illustrative of a dynamic in which affect is at its source and needs to be processed by language in order to be expressed and represented<sup>171</sup>. It also corresponds to another characterization of ‘affect as excess’ according to Moyano Ariza’s categorisation. In the second scene illustrating the second dynamic between affect and

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<sup>168</sup> “De sfeer van de droom was nog bij me maar ongrijpbaar. Ik zocht naar woorden om de emotie thuis te brengen en te temmen.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 169.

<sup>169</sup> “‘Herinneren is selecteren.’ De zin schoot als een bliksemschicht door me heen en echode, drie- vier- vijfmaal. Ja, Sarah, nou weet ik het wel. Alsof ik dat altijd heb geweten. Alsof ik niet weet dat ik elke keer dat ik thuiskwam naar de kapstok keek. En altijd wilde weten waar ze heen ging, waar ze was. Ik controleerde haar. Tot ze er gek van werd. ‘Je bewaakt me! Je bent mijn man, niet mijn cipier.’ Ze had gelijk. Ik beloofde beterschap. Ik deed mijn best. Het ging goed. Het ging toch goed?” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 170.

<sup>170</sup> “Bij het lichaam van Suzanne had ik een ogenblik opluchting gevoeld. Ze kon niet meer van me weg.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 170.

<sup>171</sup> In Massumi’s terms the intensity or affect would thus become an emotion.

rationality, a slightly different function or use of affect is shown. It still corresponds to the same category of approaches described by Moyano Ariza, however: “(a)ffect [...] offers a lexicon to expand on the analyses of pre-cognitive processes that lead to emotion in order to open a space to think how these processes are represented in literature and artworks.”<sup>172</sup> Both scenes that I am focusing on from *Zonder noorden* to describe the oscillation between affect and rationality bear similarity to the perspective on affect that is an heir to Sedgwick and Frank’s approach to affect, as has been suggested earlier in the discussion on the genealogy of affect theory. In the second scene from *Zonder noorden* the dynamic between affect and rationality looks different: affect must first be processed by means of cognition that uses a structure of mutually dependent and variously connoted concepts also known as language. It is only after affect has gone through this process that it can be represented in a novel, an artistic medium based on language.

Especially the second type of oscillation between affect and cognition illustrates a shift away from a postmodern conception of affect, as in Jameson’s “waning of affect,”<sup>173</sup> to a conception of affect under metamodernism observed by Alison Gibbons in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*: “In the contemporary, then, we can perhaps speak once more of a hermeneutics of the self, a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses to today’s social situation.”<sup>174</sup> This general statement is illustrated in *Zonder noorden* by the inclusion of both types of oscillation in a representation of conscious processes. It is also an illustration of the ways and processes by means of which intensities can be processed and emotional or cognitive reactions are articulated. In conclusion, in this section we have seen that the textual signal representation of consciousness also foregrounds oscillation between affect and cognition and thus contributes to the hypothesis that oscillation is the governing and structuring principle in this novel.

#### 2.4 Motif, intertextuality: oscillating between various constructions of identity

In the last section I will discuss two textual forms of equivalence, one internal and one external to the text, namely, motif and intertextuality. I will first discuss what connects an *abstract* motif, as defined by Van Boven and Dorleijn, to a textual motif.<sup>175</sup> Then I will point out the oscillation

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<sup>172</sup> Moyano Ariza, “Affect Theory with Literature and Art,” 4.

<sup>173</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism Or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991, 9.

<sup>174</sup> Alison Gibbons, 2017, “Metamodern Affect” In *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker et al., 85.

<sup>175</sup> For the difference between textual motif and abstract motif, I am drawing on Erica van Boven and Gillis Dorleijn, *Literair mechaniek: inleiding tot de analyse van verhalen en gedichten* (Bussum: Coutinho, 1999), 272-273.



of the way that the motif is embedded in the novel. Both motif and intertextuality foreground oscillation between epistemological, ontological and affective questions and at the same time contribute to the denouement of the trauma-processing affective plotline. The concrete textual motif of an encounter between man and animal, Robert and a doe, is an important textual signal because it structures the affective plotline of the novel. It appears both at the beginning and at the end of the novel. The second time that the concrete textual motif of the doe appears, it becomes clear that on the level of abstract motifs, it is contributing to the development of ideas around Robert's identity. The doe motif is also connected with the use of intertextuality in *Zonder noorden* – it contains a reference to a classical work of English literature, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë. In what follows, I am first going to analyse the relevant passages where the foregrounding of both abstract motifs and oscillation of various questions occurs and then I am going to contextualize my analysis of textual signals motif and intertextuality by references to secondary literature about contemporary novels.

#### 2.4.1 First encounter with a doe

As has already been mentioned, the doe motif appears at the beginning and at the end of the novel. In both cases, the encounter with the doe is accompanied by an intense affective experience during which Robert's rationality becomes overwhelmed and momentarily replaced by an intuitive, sense-based perception, by hunches, and an experience of déjà vu. The motif of the doe is first introduced when Robert first arrives at the rented house that he is to inhabit in Horn:

And suddenly, as a dea ex machina crossing my path, a doe was standing in the spotlights twenty meters from my kangaroo bar. I slammed on the brake. Because I was driving very slowly anyway, it seemed as if we had arranged to meet: I had a rendezvous with her. [...] A shiver ran over the sleek brown body of the animal. She moved her thin legs, stepped aside as if she wanted to let me through. I waited. She did the same.<sup>176</sup>

This moment of a significant encounter between man and animal is described in such a way that the prevalence of other than rational and sensual perception becomes emphasised, as is

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<sup>176</sup> “En opeens, als een dea ex machina op mijn weg neergedaald, stond daar in de spotlights op twintig meter voor mijn kangaroo bar een ree. [...] Ik trapte op de rem. Omdat ik toch al heel langzaam reed, leek het afgesproken werk: ik had een rendez-vous met haar. [...] Een rilling gleed over het ranke bruine lijf van het dier. Ze verplaatste haar dunne poten, stapte opzij alsof ze me door wilde laten. Ik wachtte. Zij ook.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 19.

evidenced by phrases such as “*deus ex machina*”,<sup>177</sup> “rendezvous with her”.<sup>178</sup> The textual motif can be read in connection with the interruption of Robert’s cognitive responses to impulses from his surroundings on the abstract level of motif analysis. Instead, he is being led by affect and intuition at this moment. When we move in the motif analysis to the level of abstract motifs, the encounters with the doe can be connected with different constructions of identity. By means of the textual motif, the novel thus foregrounds epistemological, ontological or relational constructions of identity. This particular encounter with the doe can be seen as a disruption of Robert’s identity as a modern, rational individual. The break with this type of identity construction marks the beginning of the destabilization and development of a new type of identity construction which can be traced by means of oscillation.

Robert enters the novel as a rational individual. This claim rests on an observation of his activities around the investigation where he hopes to discover the truth through rational deductions and logic. This makes him a character striving for the ideal of knowledge that is typical for a modernist (often failing, but ever more attempted) struggle to reach some kind of epistemological certainty. It is this model of self-understanding and identity that Robert momentarily strays from when he arrives at the house that he is to inhabit in Horn for the first time. The motif can also, with a view of the further development of the story be read as a premonition of the affective questions that are discussed in the trauma-processing plotline. The change of Robert’s identity construction is ushered in by his experience of *déjà vu*. When the doe disappears into the forest, Robert’s attitude to the place that he has arrived at, changes:

Obeying an impulse, I stepped out of the car and walked the few last steps to the house. I needed to approach it cautiously and humbly, lay aside the coarse posture of the owner. [...] I had already experienced this. Exactly like this. I had thought ‘still fifty meters to go’ once before. I knew this feeling of expectation. [...] I had not been alone the last time, just like I was not alone now. There was someone with me. [...] I cleared my throat to get rid of the emotion. There was only one reality.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 19.

<sup>178</sup> “Rendez-vous met haar.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 19.

<sup>179</sup> “Gehoorzamend aan een ingeving stapte ik uit en liep het laatste stuk naar het huis. Ik moest omzichtig en nederig naderen, niet met het ordinaire air van de bezitter [...]. Dit had ik eerder meegemaakt. Precies zo. De woorden ‘nog vijftig meter’ had ik eerder gedacht. Dit gevoel van verwachting kende ik. [...] De vorige keer was ik niet alleen geweest, zoals ik ook nu niet alleen was. Er was iemand bij me. [...] Ik kuchte om de ontroering te verdrijven. Er was maar één werkelijkheid.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 20.

Robert's arrival at the house of Beverly is characterized by the primacy of intuition and a strange, rationally unexplainable feeling of déjà vu. He feels like he is not alone. When his rational defences and well-worn neural pathways that he is accustomed to use are suspended and rerouted for a moment, he is overcome by the irrational feeling of not being alone, in contrast to what his sensual perception tells him and to how he has been used to living in the last eight years since Suzanne's death. A swift rational reaction to this affect however follows and muffles the intensity, significance, and poignancy of that moment. In the last sentence of the quotation, Robert assures himself of the ontological stability of his world. This marks the end of intuition and other affective means of relating to the world being given free reign for the following several months until the supernatural experience with the embodied projection of Suzanne occurs during which his affective needs are sustained. With regard to the rest of the novel, this moment of rationality getting the upper hand ushers in the part of the novel where Robert ostensibly and consciously pays most of the attention to the epistemological investigation of Beverly's disappearance (the investigative storyline). The unexplainable déjà vu can be interpreted as foregrounding the affective questions. As has been already pointed out, the motif analysis on the abstract level connects the textual motif of the doe with a construction of identity.

A concept that helps to think about an identity construction within the affective dominant is relationism. 'Relationism', a term introduced in the writings of Yra van Dijk, Merlijn Olon and Esther Op de Beek,<sup>180</sup> as a characteristic of contemporary literature, has to do with a new construction of identity visible in the novels written in the new millennium, especially those written by authors of the millennial generation. Identity construction is no longer a matter of course in the works of the authors Van Dijk, Olon and Op de Beek are looking at. Demeyer and Vitse even speak of an "crisis of identity"<sup>181</sup> as one of the many crises that the millennial generation is confronted with.<sup>182</sup> Van Dijk and Olon see the fact that identity is being subjected to inquiry in contemporary novels as a result (among others) of the disintegration of metanarratives characteristic of postmodernism and resulting in relativism. They give the

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<sup>180</sup> Relationism has been introduced in two articles about relationism. One was authored by Van Dijk and Olon under the title "Radicaal relationisme, het andere engagement in de jongste Nederlandstalige literatuur". The second one, "Niña Weijers en Nina Polak. Een nieuwe generatie auteurs maakt naam" was written by Van Dijk and Op de Beek. There is a significant overlap in the definition of relationism but the term has not been demonstrated on the same corpus of novels. The new generation of writers from the millennial generation has received much wider notice between the publication date of the first and second article (2015 and 2019).

<sup>181</sup> "Identiteitscrisis." Demeyer en Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 13.

<sup>182</sup> This is such an important insight for Demeyer and Vitse that they introduce their book *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* with it.

following definition of relationism: “These texts go further and explore the possibilities and limitations of the construction of the individual (or subject) in the midst of, and above all, through others.”<sup>183</sup> What makes relationism a relevant term for the discussion of this first appearance of the motif of the doe is Robert’s sense of not being alone. I interpret this as a foretaste of the connection between the textual motif of the doe and the abstract motif of a construction of relational identity that is developed more fully towards the end of the novel.

Right before the second appearance of the textual motif of the doe and before Robert’s second encounter with it, the motif of identity construction appears again. While right before the first appearance of the doe motif, Robert’s identity was constructed in modernist terms, the second time the motif surfaces, Robert reflects on identity in postmodern terms. He looks at himself in the mirror of the car during a drive in the surroundings of Horn and thinks: “Who was it looking at me there? Who was it thinking there? [...] The hands of the stranger that I was laid calmly on the steering wheel [...]”<sup>184</sup> He experiences estrangement, emptiness and doubt about his identity. Earlier in the book, during a conversation with his (at that point still platonic) love interest, Jane Miller, he experiences his identity as a void: “In a flash, I experienced my life as a fruitless attempt at covering my emptiness up with stories.”<sup>185</sup> Robert’s self-image has something in common with the “absence of the core”<sup>186</sup> foregrounded by characters in postmodern novels. The previous quotation refers to the worldview present in postmodern novels and described by Bart Vervaeck as follows: “the absence is central to every postmodern novel.”<sup>187</sup> Absence as the main feature of characters means that they become “what they ‘really’ are, that is a collection of words and texts.”<sup>188</sup>

The way in which Robert describes his identity at certain points in the novel foregrounds ontological themes having to do with realness and existence of fictional reality as has been suggested previously. The foregrounding of ontological questions is another pole connected by

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<sup>183</sup> “Deze teksten gaan een stap verder en verkennen de mogelijkheden en beperkingen van de constructie van het individu (of subject) te midden van, en vooral ook *door* anderen.” Merlijn Olton and Yra van Dijk, “Radicaal relationisme,” *De Gids* 2015 No 3, accessed 13 August 2019, <https://www.de-gids.nl/artikelen/radicaal-relationisme>.

<sup>184</sup> “Wie was dat die daar keek? Wie was dat die daar dacht? [...] De handen van de vreemdeling die ik was lagen rustig op het stuurwiel [...]” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 224.

<sup>185</sup> “In een flits nam ik mijn hele leven waar als een vruchteloze poging mijn leegte te verhullen in verhalen.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 179.

<sup>186</sup> “Afwezigheid van de kern.” Bart Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman* (Nijmegen/Mechelen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2007), 47.

<sup>187</sup> “De afwezigheid staat centraal in elke postmoderne roman.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 47.

<sup>188</sup> “Wat ze ‘echt’ zijn, namelijk een verzameling woorden en teksten.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 64.

the oscillating movement with other passages in the novel where the theme of identity construction foregrounds different questions. The most striking moment of reorientation of Robert's identity towards another in relationship with whom he begins to understand himself happens also in the presence of another (or the same?) doe.

#### 2.4.2 Second encounter with a doe

Robert's first encounter with the doe happens in a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. It stands in sharp contrast to another interaction between man and animal that takes place towards the end of the novel and is anything but harmonious:

It happened shortly before I would take a turn for the dirt road by the mailboxes. Our paths crossed at full speed. I didn't see her. She didn't see me. [...] A thud, the hard kangaroo bar of the Dodge in her muscled hind end. The deer flew up and fell down, I had already passed her by, stood on the brakes, cursing. [...] She lay twenty meters behind me, a motionless animal. When she heard me coming closer, she lifted her head and looked at me with gleaming eyes.<sup>189</sup>

Robert is shocked by the accident and is unable to accept that this time, his encounter with the doe should result in the death of the animal. He picks up the injured but still breathing doe, puts her onto the tailgate of his car and rides her to Jane, who lives closest and knows the vet. He wants to do everything in his power to save the animal's life. Jane tells him, however, that the doe's spine is broken and that transporting her to the vet to give her an injection will only prolong her suffering. She offers Robert her gun and does not give him much space to refuse to relieve the animal's suffering.

As Robert aims the gun at the doe's head, he relives the trauma of Suzanne's murder. The text does not make this connection explicitly; however it is obvious from the following conversation between Robert and Jane:

I screamed as I pulled the trigger. [...] Death drew a film over her eyes. Life had left her. Carcass. My breath came in huffs. I wasn't getting enough air in. I was standing

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<sup>189</sup> "Even voordat ik de dirt road bij de brievenbussen zou inslaan gebeurde het. Onze wegen kruisten op volle snelheid. Ik zag het niet. Zij zag het niet. [...] Een doffe klap, de harde *kangaroo bar* van de Dodge in haar gespierde achterlijf. Het hert vloog op en viel neer, ik was haar al voorbij, stond vloekend op de rem. [...] Twintig meter achter me lag ze, een roerloos dier. Toen ze me hoorde naderen hief ze haar kop en keek me aan met glanzende ogen." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 224.

by the car, head bowed, I let the weapon fall on the ground and couldn't recognize the sound that came out of me. I was howling like a siren at night. [...] The sound of the shot was echoing in my head. ... I experienced the reality as if from behind a thick glass wall. This has already happened before. [...]

'Alright' said Jane. 'What's all this about? This is not a normal reaction.'

'I will tell you all,' I said, hoarsely.<sup>190</sup>

The description of re-traumatization and the ensuing panic attack that this moment induces in Robert harkens back to the panic attack described earlier (in section 2.3.1) in reaction to the momentarily perceived meaninglessness of the investigation. This time however, the affect is not induced by the stand in for the Robert's real concern (foregrounded by the detective-like storyline), but with what he has been trying to process during his time in Horn; with Suzanne's death (foregrounded by the affective storyline). It is therefore much more direct, raw and intensive. All the grief and anger at the catastrophe that has struck at his doorstep eight years ago is expressed and finally released in the screaming and the crying. The fact that Robert has had to kill the animal has triggered his old wounds and his pent-up emotions that completely overwhelm him with their intensity.

The connection between the concrete textual motif at the beginning and end of the novel (which causes all manner of symbolical layers and affective significance to attach to the latter moment) does not only frame the novel as what happens in between these two encounters. The second encounter between Robert and the doe is, just as the first one, a signal that the epistemological and ontological ways to construct identity are going to be bypassed, thus giving affective questions and relational construction of identity free reign. This time, unlike with the feeling of déjà vu, Robert makes more space for affect in his life, thus giving himself the chance to fully experience, acknowledge, process and integrate feelings in his life.

The fact that the doe motif is accompanied by an irrational component (in the first doe scene, this was the feeling of déjà vu) is augmented in this scene even further by another kind of textual signal; intertextuality. The use of intertextuality foregrounds both affective questions and

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<sup>190</sup> "Ik schreeuwde terwijl ik de trekker overhaalde. [...] De dood trok een vlies over haar ogen. Het leven was weg. Kadaver. Mijn adem gierde. Ik kon geen lucht meer krijgen. Ik stond naast de auto gebogen, liet het wapen vallen en herkende het geluid niet dat uit me kwam. Ik loeide als een versleten sirene. [...] Ik hoorde het schot in mijn schedel echoën. [...] Vanachter een dik glazen scherm nam ik de werkelijkheid waar. Dat had ik eerder meegemaakt. [...]"

'Oké,' zei Jane. 'Wat heeft dit allemaal te betekenen? Deze reactie is niet normaal.'

'Ik zal het je vertellen,' zei ik schor." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 227-228.

creates an atmosphere of heightened affect here. The scene that occurs after Robert's accident with the doe has an intense emotional atmosphere - the accident happens at night, Robert's remorse about hurting an animal that has initially welcomed him to his new home plays a role, as well as his decision to involve Jane, in whom he is interested romantically. The significance and affective intensity of this moment is amplified by intertextual echoes of another scene in which a man in dire straits and in an emotionally intense situation calls a woman whose name is Jane. In the intertext, she hears his call spiritually, by means of an intuition or unusually heightened sensual experience, rather than by means of hearing.

Here, the text of *Zonder noorden* refers to the finale of *Jane Eyre*, particularly to the moment where Jane hears the desperate call of her lover, Edward Rochester although they are physically very distant from each other. The strange, almost supernatural atmosphere of *Jane Eyre* lends its intensity to the comparatively more mundane (although affectively also significant) scene in *Zonder noorden*. It is the famous finale of *Jane Eyre*, in particular the following scene, that is being referred to. The heroine, Jane, recounts:

The feeling was not like an electric shock; but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor; from which they were now summoned, and forced to wake. They rose expectant: eye and ear waited, while the flesh quivered on my bones. [...] I saw nothing: but I heard a voice somewhere cry—

“Jane! Jane! Jane!” Nothing more. ...

(I)t was the voice of a human being—a known, loved, well-remembered voice—that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe—wildly, eerily, urgently.<sup>191</sup>

For the reader who already recognizes the allusion (Robert and Jane later refer explicitly to the canonical work of English literature when reflecting on this scene), the intertextuality heightens the emotional and affective intensity and significance of the moment. Robert also echoes Rochester's words, calling Jane's name twice during this night scene, first when he arrives at her house and calls her in his distress about the doe and for the second time after he has shared with her why his reaction to this situation had been so intense:

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<sup>191</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre. an Autobiography*, (London, 1847), 220, ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/books/jane-eyre-autobiography-edited-currer-bell-three/docview/2138576735/se-2?accountid=35514>.

When I was done talking – empty, done, raw – she remained seated and deep in thought. ... She stood up, came up behind me and took the blanket off of my shoulders. Her small hands began to massage my neck and shoulder muscles. ... She slipped her hands into the opening of my shirt. I raised my arms and pulled her head closer to me, next to my head, cheek to cheek.  
'Jane,' I said. 'Jane.'<sup>192</sup>

The second time Jane Miller's name is spoken, it is after the crisis has passed. The name sounds like a sigh, expressing intimacy, relief and desire.

The doe accident leads to Robert opening up before Jane; his cathartic release of his emotions makes this moment even more significant. The interpretation of the relational consequences of the accident as a basis on which Robert can build his identity becomes more plausible by means of a contrast with the previously mentioned emptiness and absence of a core or essence that was foregrounded by the ontological construction of his identity. The expression of feelings in the presence of Jane creates a connection, a relationship, based on which Robert can build his identity although it is unstable and relativist. The relationship with Jane represents a hope for a richer and more stable life for Robert. With the relationship he has the chance to really become rooted in Horn. When it comes to sex on the night in question, the text emphasizes the significance of physical closeness for the construction of identity of both Jane and Robert: "We stepped, lightfooted, into each other's territory. ... No longer were we who we had been before, became new and different."<sup>193</sup> According to Aukje van Rooden, sex is imbued with a large amount of significance in the novels of millennial authors which can also be read as one of the expressions of relationism: "the many other bedfellows in these millennial novels (are) not a symbol of emptiness, but functional means through which one can experience connection [...]."<sup>194</sup> Still, despite this relationalist element characterizing the representation of a sexual act

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<sup>192</sup> "'Toen ik uitverteld was - leeg, op, rauw - bleef ze een tijdje zitten denken. [...] Ze stond op, kwam achter me staan en nam de deken van mijn schouders weg. Haar kleine handen begonnen de spieren in mijn nek en schouders te masseren. [...] Ze gleed met haar handen de opening van mijn overhemd in. Ik hief mijn armen en trok haar hoofd dicht naar me toe, naast het mijne, wang aan wang. 'Jane,' zei ik. 'Jane.'" Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 228.

<sup>193</sup> "We betraden lichtvochtig elkaars terrein. [...] Waren niet meer wie we waren, werden nieuw en anders." Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 230.

<sup>194</sup> "De vele andere knuffelmaatjes in deze millennialromans (zijn) geen symbool voor ledigheid, maar functionele middelen om je verbonden te weten [...]." Aukje van Rooden, "Had ik maar een hondje Engagement van de millennialgeneratie," *De Reactor*, published 30 October 2020, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://dereactor.org/teksten/aukje-van-rooden-had-ik-maar-een-hondje-engagement-van-de-millennialgeneratie>.



in this novel, Robert cannot be seen as the same type of character as the ones populating novels written by millennials, as we will see below.

The relativity and lack of stability that goes hand in hand with the relational identity is highlighted by means of oscillation that “overcomes and undermines [...] conflicting positions.”<sup>195</sup> Robert and Jane do not immediately throw their all into the relationship, they are being cautious. Jane expresses it as follows: “I am not going to deny what has happened between us tonight no more than what it meant for me. But we don’t have to make a big deal out of it. I am free. You are free.”<sup>196</sup> Both of them, however, ascribe a lot of significance to the night that they have spent together, which becomes clear from how Robert thinks about it: “This was a night that you only experience once in your lifetime, so fully alive on the edge of death, with emotions of laser-sharp intensity, so completely in the moment, with all cells on high alert, so out of time.”<sup>197</sup> Even in this quotation we can hear echoes of the *Jane Eyre* intertextuality with its focus on heightened sensual perception: “it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake.”<sup>198</sup> Based on this quotation, the significance of this moment as a basis for Robert’s new conception of relational identity would seem to be confirmed. However, next time the intertextual reference with *Jane Eyre* is foregrounded, it can be interpreted as another pole between which the novel oscillates again. Oscillation is therefore not only traceable on the level of the abstract motif but also foregrounded by means of the textual signal intertextuality.

The instability of relational identity and perhaps more specifically, of the budding relationship between Robert and Jane becomes clear when the intertext, *Jane Eyre*, is explicitly mentioned in the text:

‘But if I am blind and needy and if my soul cries out to yours in my lonely home,  
‘Jane! Jane!’ will you hear me then and will you come?’  
‘Yes, Mr. Rochester,’ said Jane.  
‘Edward. You can call me Edward.’

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<sup>195</sup> Van den Akker en Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 10.

<sup>196</sup> “Ik ga niet ontkennen wat er vannacht tussen ons is gebeurd, en evenmin welke betekenis dat voor me had. Maar we hoeven er geen consequenties aan te verbinden. Ik ben vrij. Jij bent vrij.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 233.

<sup>197</sup> “De nacht was er een geweest zoals een mens maar een enkele keer in zijn leven meemaakt, zo volmaakt levend op de rand van de dood, zo messcherp in zijn gevoelens, zo volledig overgegeven aan het moment, zo alert in alle cellen, zo los van de tijd.” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 232.

<sup>198</sup> Brontë, *Jane Eyre. an Autobiography*, 220.

‘Okay. Edward.’

This was the first time that I really heard her laugh [...].<sup>199</sup>

This second intertextual reference foregrounds a different, namely an ontological, question. It can be seen as an expansion on the postmodern idea of identity as an emptiness, covered up, filled and masked by various stories. In this moment Robert is revising and re-remembering the night with Jane so that it would fit into the frame created by the hypotext, *Jane Eyre*.<sup>200</sup> He is re-forming his experience of the previous night so that it would be more in line with the emphases of the hypotext. This is the power of canonical texts – they function as frames within which the experiences of characters (but also of real readers, of course) can be recontextualized and by these means gain certain meanings rather than others. The explicit reference to *Jane Eyre* is re-formatting the memory that Robert has of the previous night and makes him see himself in the role of Rochester and Jane in the position of the titular heroine of the Victorian novel. This foregrounds an ontological question: does Robert’s experience exist on its own or only as a reiteration of an influential cultural text, specifically the canonical work *Jane Eyre*?

This reframing of the experience (and the relationship with Jane) in terms of a well-known and widely available cultural story influences the way that Robert and Jane subsequently talk about their experience during their next date, which is the context wherein the previous quotation appears. They explicitly mention the source of intertextuality that has previously granted a special layer of mystery, intensity, and significance to the night of the doe which Robert called the most intense night of his life. The lightness and humor with which they refer to the Victorian novel now, on the evening after, alleviates the previously experienced seriousness and weight of the night. The use of intertextuality in the novel oscillates between the intensification of an intense and significant affective experience and the lightness with which that experience is relativized by means of a joke. The affective lightness connected with the second, ontological concern foregrounding the use of intertextuality can be related to the “free-floating signs and

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<sup>199</sup> “‘Maar als ik blind en behoeftig ben en als mijn ziel in mijn eenzame huis naar de jouwe roept ‘Jane! Jane!’”, hoor je me dan en kom je dan?’

‘Yes, Mr. Rochester,’ zei Jane.

‘Edward. Je mag Edward zeggen.’

‘Goed. Edward.’

Voor het eerst hoorde ik haar echt lachen [...].” Noordervliet, *Zonder noorden*, 233.

<sup>200</sup> I use the terminology of Gerard Genette who makes a useful distinction between a hypertext (in this case *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis*) and an older text which is the source to which the hypertext refers (*Jane Eyre*). See *Draden in het donker*, ed. by. Yra van Dijk, Maarten de Pourcq and Carl de Strycker (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2013), 44-45.

intensities”<sup>201</sup> characteristic of the postmodern waning of affect. However, speaking in Gibbons’ terms, the meaningful emotional response that has been formulated is being undone again in the next oscillating movement. The metamodern affect – as opposed to Jameson’s postmodern conception of affect – on which Robert pins his hopes towards the end of the novel is characterized by seriousness and intensity. The novel oscillates between both versions of affect and all three constructions of identity foregrounded by the *Jane Eyre* intertextuality and the doe motif, without giving a precedence to one or the other option. Thus, the third textual signal considered by means of the methodology of foregrounding confirms what the two previous sections have also shown – the novel is mostly governed by metamodern oscillation, a continuity between postmodernism and the contemporary which is more important as a structuring principle for *Zonder noorden* than either of the already identified dominants alone.

## 2.5 Conclusion

An analysis of a contemporary novel that aims to avoid inheriting the problems of periodizing accounts of contemporary literature needs to circumvent the problems paired with periodization. McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* contains a figurative passage, a parable of sorts, that illustrates the problem with a periodizing description of the aesthetic shift and at the same time also points to the shortcomings of the concept of dominant (as McHale uses it). He uses a quotation from an interview with an American writer, Steve Katz in order to illuminate the use of the dominant capturing “mechanisms of historical change”.<sup>202</sup> Katz speaks about the aesthetic shift in terms of crossing the street when the light turns green:

The logic of literary history brought writers in various cities—cities in Europe and Latin America as well as in North America—to a crosswalk; when the stoplights changed, they had one of two options, either to remain on this side and continue to practice a modernist poetics of the epistemological dominant (as many of them have done, of course), or to cross to a postmodernist poetics of the ontological dominant. The streets were different, but the *crossing* was the same.<sup>203</sup>

McHale uses the formalist tool of the dominant to describe the crossing from one governing aesthetic principle to another and the illustration he uses makes it seem like the nature of the crossing from modernism to postmodernism was very simple. Either stay on this side with the

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<sup>201</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism Or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9.

<sup>202</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 7.

<sup>203</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 11.

epistemological questions or cross over to the other side where one concerns oneself with the ontological questions. We could however ask ourselves whether the dynamic of historical change is as simple as crossing from one dominant aesthetic principle to another, as this image suggests.

Because the presupposed answer to this “whether” question is ‘no’, as Herrmann et al. also suggest, I have proposed a complication of the image of the crossing of a street by means of the concept of oscillation. The use of the concept of oscillation has allowed me to investigate a tool by means of which attention would not focus only on the new, innovative textual elements, as the use of the dominant as the only methodological concept for the analysis of novels would show me. It allowed me to focus also on the way in which continuities from earlier periods function in the texts. The complication of the dynamic of the shift with the back-and-forth of oscillation forces the literary critic or historiographer to slow down, check their methodology for periodizing and potentially distorting characteristics and lay aside the near-automatic focus on innovation and progress that characterizes this genre of writing about literature. By adding oscillation to Demeyer and Vitse’s suggestion to read contemporary literature through the prism of the affective dominant, I have zoomed in on the specificity of the current aesthetic shift on the literary-historiographical level and have concluded that its dynamic is different than the one described by McHale, namely, much more aware of and favouring continuities. I have reached this conclusion after seeing plentiful examples of the functioning of oscillation as a continuity and as the foregrounded element in the text of *Zonder noorden*.

I sought for a way to analyze Noordervliet’s novel without having recourse to references to current political situation, such as Herrmann et al. suggest in their call not to periodize but to still attempt historicization. Nor did I have recourse to ideology critique, as Demeyer and Vitse do in their attempt to historicize. I will return to the reasons why I have not chosen to follow the route of historicization and ideological critique in the conclusion to the dissertation. Although the concept of the dominant has not been helpful on the literary-historiographical level, it has still proven fruitful on the level of textual analysis where the methodology of foregrounding provided the necessary support in the analysis of a contemporary literary text. Foregrounding drew my attention to textual signals provoking various questions. The interpretive problem that *Zonder noorden* creates for analysis that uses foregrounding as a conceptual tool is that the textual signals foreground several issues at once. This is where oscillation came into play, this time also on the textual level, by enabling me to describe the movement between foregrounded questions and zoom in on their interconnectedness and

mutual dependence. The continuities between postmodernism which have remained vague and unspecific in most obituaries of postmodernism or required the choice for a specific theme to provide a foothold for the textual analysis, have thus been decidedly put on the map throughout the analysis of *Zonder noorden*. The oscillation between foregrounding of various questions is both a continuity between contemporary and postmodern novels and also the characteristic that I consider to be most significant and descriptive for this contemporary novel.

While oscillation and foregrounding were the most important methodological instruments that I used for the analysis of *Zonder noorden*, I have also embedded the interpretation in recent insights into contemporary literature and affect theory. In the second section of the chapter, I have compared Gibbons' insights into the 'metamodern affect' with the postmodernist conception of affect as characterized by Jameson and shown how oscillation between these two conceptions is foregrounded by means of representation of consciousness. Both poles foregrounded by this textual signal and both oscillating dynamics explicated in section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 of this chapter however illustrate that my approach to affect - described by Moyano Ariza as 'affect as excess' - is in keeping with the genealogical branch of affect theory that I use throughout in this project. Another embedding of my analysis in insights from recent articles analyzing contemporary Dutch novels, especially those written by authors of the millennial generation, came in the third section of the chapter. I have used the term relationism to describe one possible construction of identity that the novel is oscillating between in its use of abstract motifs. The other pole of the oscillation in the area of identity construction is the protagonist's identity as a collection of linguistic signs described by Vervaeck as representative for the postmodern ontological questions that also appear in *Zonder noorden*.

The attention that the novel pays to the representation of processes of consciousness and the various complications inherent to the representation of affect in literary texts bears witness to the fact that *Zonder noorden* is exploring the affective trend in contemporary literature only tentatively. The way in which affect is employed testifies to more creativity and playfulness in representation in the novels of the authors from the millennial generation who seem more committed to it.<sup>204</sup> This is visible especially where identity construction is concerned. Compared with the characters from the millennial novels,<sup>205</sup> Robert's relational identity is only

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<sup>204</sup> See, for example, Nina Polak's novel *Gebreik is een groot woord* with a representation of affective communication between a mother and a few weeks old foetus by means of a reference to arcade games. (Polak, *Gebreik is een groot woord*, 144)

<sup>205</sup> For a critical analysis of this aspect of the novelistic production of millennials, see Aragorn Fuhrmann, "Millennial fantasieën over oprechtheid bij Sally Rooney, Joost de Vries en Ben Lerner," *De Reactor*, published

partially sketched, and it is undermined by oscillation. The modernist aspect of identity construction foregrounded in the investigative plotline by means of Robert's emphasis on the power of information and the relativization of the significance of the night that he has spent with Jane prevent the possibility to read him as someone who understands himself, predominantly in relation to others. The description of his identity however does contain some characteristics of relationism and can therefore be seen as a sketch of a type of character that is more fully worked out and introduced in the novels by authors of the millennial generation. With oscillating and hesitating steps through the many nuances and oppositions, Nelleke Noordervliet's novel seeks a way towards a trend that academic critique has so far identified in mainly in the works of authors two generations younger.

### 3. Chapter 3 Putting affect back into the affective dominant: oscillation between paranoid and reparative readerly position in *Klont*

*Among Klein's names for the reparative process is love.*<sup>206</sup>

#### 3.1 Introduction

When choosing the textual characteristics that foreground the dominant question the reader inherently always plays a role in this process with all their predilections, affects, interests, formulated research questions, expectations and ambitions. McHale mentions this aspect of the dominant in *Postmodernist Fiction*: “In short, different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it.”<sup>207</sup> In this chapter I want to describe the positions that readers can assume when reading a contemporary literary text, and reflect on how these positions influence what becomes foregrounded. What interpretations of the novel *Klont* (Clump) written in 2017 by Maxim Februari can we get when the readerly attitude oscillates between two poles? The chapter thus focuses on the aspect of dominant as a readerly attitude.

Februari is a respected and well-known author of literary novels, despite the fact that he has published only three novels in his lifetime, with the span of almost twenty years between his debut *De zonen van het uitzicht*, 1989 (The Sons of the View) and his second novel *De literaire kring*, 2007 (*The Book Club*). Ten years have passed between the publication of the second novel and *Klont*, that I am analysing in this chapter. In the meantime, however, the author has not been idle. Until 2010, he has been writing columns for *de Volkskrant* (The People's Paper) and since that year for NRC which have been collected and published as three books: *De onbetrouwbare verteller*, 2019 (The Unreliable Narrator), *Ons soort mensen*, 2011 (Our Kind of People) and *Park Welgelegen* 2004, (Well-situated Park). He writes about his transition from woman to man in *De maakbare man: notities over transseksualiteit* (*The Making of a Man Notes on transsexuality*, 2014).<sup>208</sup> Apart from his literary career, Februari describes himself as

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<sup>206</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>207</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 6.

<sup>208</sup> Two books of Maxim Februari have been translated into English. I have given their official titles in the following two cases; *The Book Club* (in 2010) and *The Making of a Man* (in 2015). The rest of the title translations are mine. For translations of all Februari's books into other languages see:

“a really friendly activist”.<sup>209</sup> in an interview with Joost van Velzen; he is a member of the Advisory Committee of the non-profit organization Bits of Freedom that strives for the protection of citizens’ data against misuse by governments and Big Tech corporations.

The reception and secondary literature on Februari’s more recent work consists of a number of reviews and only a few scholarly articles. The most influential account of the development of Februari’s literary career can be found in Vaessens’ *De revanche van de roman* (The Revenge of the Novel), where *De literaire kring* is one of the six analysed novels. Vaessens uses Februari’s second novel to illustrate his main argument that attempts to fill in the critical vacuum after the perceived end of postmodernism with the age-old dilemma of literary autonomy vs. social relevance of literature.<sup>210</sup> He invents the term “late postmodernism”<sup>211</sup> to refer to the shift that he perceives in the novels of authors approximately a generation older than the millennials (with the exception of Frans Kellendonk). These authors have begun their literary careers as postmodernists but are now concerned about the social relevance of literature undermined both by modernist elitism and by postmodernist deconstruction of literary conventions and humanist values. Vaessens presents Februari’s vision of postmodernism as a “recess”<sup>212</sup> or “sabbatical”<sup>213</sup> during which he and his fellow authors had the chance “to invent how language works”.<sup>214</sup> According to Vaessens, Februari’s second novel bears witness to “seeking an audience”.<sup>215</sup> because it distances itself from the literary experimentation and reassumes the other task of an author, namely being part of public debates and offering an artistic reflection on current social, political, economic and cultural issues.

Vaessens’ account of the development of Februari’s oeuvre has been influential for the reception of the latter’s following novel, *Klont*, too. With his argument for late postmodernism and the contrast between postmodernist autonomy and engagement, Vaessens has created a

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<https://letterenfonds.secure.force.com/vertalingendatabase/search?type=auteurs&query=Maxim%20Februari&id=a08b00000047thFAQ>.

<sup>209</sup> “Een hele vriendelijke activist.” Joost van Velzen, “Een hoop data boven ons hoofd”, *Trouw*, published 11 October 2017, accessed 20 June 2022.

<sup>210</sup> The theme of social commitment of literature (engagement in Dutch) is mentioned in the subtitle of *Revanche van de roman: Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*. (Literature, authority and engagement).

<sup>211</sup> “Laatpostmodernisme.” Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman: Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2009), 5.

<sup>212</sup> “Reces.” Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman*, 160.

<sup>213</sup> “Sabbatical.” Maxim Februari, “Schrijven met open raam”, *De Groene Amsterdammer* 19-10-2007, p.30-31. Quoted in Vaessens (2009), 162.

<sup>214</sup> “Uit te vinden hoe de taal werkte.” Vaessens *De revanche van de roman*, 162.

<sup>215</sup> “Op zoek naar een publiek.” Vaessens *De revanche van de roman*, 132.



framework for interpretation that has left its traces in the reviews of *Klont*. In his longer review for *De reactor* (The Reactor) Vervaeck describes *Klont* in terms that betray the influence of Vaessens' framing of Februari as a writer who sees it as his task to comment on the current developments in society, convinced of the importance of literary novels having a voice in the public debate: "*Klont* relates the story of two men who combat the increasing virtuality and inhumanness by means of literature."<sup>216</sup> Marja Pruis styles *Klont* in her review as "a deceptively good read,"<sup>217</sup> which also coincides with Vaessens' discussion of Februari's oeuvre as developing from a difficult, formally experimental postmodernist novel to "readable"<sup>218</sup> and "other types of literature for normal people".<sup>219</sup> These reviews and judgements will function as a backdrop for my argumentation in this chapter. What can however be pointed out already is that Vaessens' influential reading of Februari as an engaged author striving for social relevance of literature is not going to play an important role in my analysis of *Klont*.

### 3.1.1 Who is the ultimate narrator?

In my reading of the novel, I have been intrigued by an interpretative problem that the text poses. The reading does not follow the frame that Vaessens offered for the interpretation of Februari's earlier novels which has had a decisive influence on the reception of *Klont*. The novel has two narrators, two (almost separate) storylines and two protagonists. The chapters following these protagonists, Alexei Krups and Bodo Klein alternate almost regularly, connected by the theme of research into the consequences of datafication. The foreword to the novel is written in first person by Alexei Krups, an up-and-coming expert on datafication and the impact of our use of personal data on the internet. In chapters narrated by him, he recounts the genesis of his ideas and opinions about the human interaction with digital technology and data, how he came up with the idea of klont ("this combination of artificial intelligence and data gone rogue that we have come to call clump")<sup>220</sup> and his rise to fame as a result of lecturing on the social and philosophical consequences of the use of data.

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<sup>216</sup> "*Klont* vertelt het verhaal van twee mannen die met literatuur de toenemende virtualiteit en onmenselijkheid te lijf gaan." Bart Vervaeck, „Een nieuwe Bint?“ *De reactor*, published 31 October 2017, accessed 31 October 2022, <https://www.dereactor.org/teksten/een-nieuwe-bint>.

<sup>217</sup> "Een bedriegelijke *good read*." Marja Pruis, „Kennen of gekend worden“, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, published 11 October 2017, accessed 31 October 2022.

<sup>218</sup> "Leesbare." Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman*, 205.

<sup>219</sup> "Andere gewone mensenliteratuur." Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman*, 205.

<sup>220</sup> "Die op hol geslagen combinatie van kunstmatige intelligentie en data die we klont zijn gaan noemen." Maxim Februari, *Klont* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2017), 120.

This success story is clearly told by a narrating ‘I’ that looks back and from time-to-time dramatizes the communicative situation in which he finds itself by an appellation to the addressee of this narrative. Sometimes, Alexei emphasizes the difference in position between himself and the addressee, such as in this case: “Well, how do these things come about, excellencies?”<sup>221</sup> or a little bit later: “No, Your Honour. Of course it wasn’t true [...]”<sup>222</sup> Here, Alexei hints at the hierarchical difference between himself and the addressee, implying that they could potentially be a judge or a jury present at his trial. After recounting how he rose to fame, Alexei’s narrative also accounts for his fall: “The first active attack against my success came from an anonymous informant who couldn’t help but feel the need to disrupt my life.”<sup>223</sup> For the reader, the shade of an allegation of plagiarism thrown over Alexei’s work does not come as a surprise, because the second chapter is titled “In de werkplaats van Alexei Krups, de oplichter” (In the workplace of Alexei Krups, the fraud). In this chapter, the narrator tells us: “Plagiarism, that’s what I was thinking in moments of reflection – plagiarism is an exacting profession. [...] Recycling, you say out loud to give it a twist. I am a dealer in intellectual waste.”<sup>224</sup> In his last chapter, Alexei is in exile in Germany, reflecting on the choices that have led to the infamous end of his career and reckoning with the fallout.

The storyline that focuses on Bodo Klein – “a technology expert and senior officer at the Ministry of Security”<sup>225</sup> – his family and colleagues, including the Minister of Security called Kirstin Elias, is narrated by an heterodiegetic narrator. This storyline supplements some of the facts and processes that are unknown from Alexei’s point of view (such as how exactly plagiarism in his work has been made public) but offers an elaboration on and counterarguments to some of his ideas about klont and datafication as well. The first chapter narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator opens on the day that Bodo sends a suicide note as an attachment in an email to all his acquaintances. Because none of his colleagues manages to open the attachment, the reasons why Bodo planned to take his life remain unclear. Moreover, at the end of the second chapter, Bodo decides not to go through with it. Bodo’s storyline offers various

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<sup>221</sup> “Tja, hoe gaat dat, excellenties?” Februari, *Klont*, 120.

<sup>222</sup> “Nee, edelachtbaren. Nee, natuurlijk was dat niet waar [...]” Februari, *Klont*, 121.

<sup>223</sup> “De eerste actieve aanval op mijn succes kwam van een anonieme tipgever die het ook niet kon helpen dat hij de behoefte voelde mijn leven in de war te sturen.” Februari, *Klont*, 183.

<sup>224</sup> “Plagiaat, dacht ik toen in mijn momenten van bespiegeling – plagiaat is een veeleisende beroepskeuze [...]. Recycling, zeg je hardop om er een draai aan te geven. Ik ben een handelaar in intellectueel afval.” Februari, *Klont*, 35.

<sup>225</sup> “Een technologie-expert en vooraanstaand ambtenaar op het ministerie van Veiligheid.” Februari, *Klont*, 8.

characterizations of the protagonist that function as a possible explanation for his wish to consider committing suicide. None of them, however, is conclusive.

In the chapters that follow, the narrative focuses on Bodo's attempts to deal with the relational and professional fallout of the announced and unimplemented decision to end his life and to find a way and a reason to continue existing in the world. He experiences detachment and isolation from his wife, Colette, and the family of her daughter from a previous marriage, Nadine, who comes to stay with them shortly before she gives birth to her third child. The chapters narrated by the extradiegetic narrator often use focalization through various characters. Thus we get to meet such characters as Nas, an employee at the Ministry of Security and a colleague of Bodo's, or Kirstin Elias, the Minister of Security, who are all recognizably part of Bodo's world. By including characters with such professions in *Klont*, Februari seems to confirm Vaessens' characterization of his second novel as "morality-providing literature".<sup>226</sup> He does this by pointing out that at that time he wrote for "The people with money and influence who are highly educated, [...] have a good job, who are increasingly more aware of the suffering of the world and still more openly unable to do something about it."<sup>227</sup> This trend, represented in *De literaire kring* by a group of characters with this profile, is even further strengthened in *Klont* by including a minister and a public intellectual among the characters. According to Vaessens, Februari's goal with this is to boost the morale of these influential public figures. In *Klont*, however, he rather records the moral failure of one of them because the latter part of the book follows the quest of the staff of the Ministry to verify the claims about *klont* and datafication made by Alexei. This eventually leads to his downfall. In the last chapter, the narrator focuses again on the domestic sphere and Bodo's relationship with his family. However, the focus on Bodo's frame of mind and emotional state is a constant throughout the chapters about him.

The two fictional worlds of the two protagonists, Alexei and Bodo, intersect only once, right in the middle of the novel in chapter 'Klein en Krups ontmoeten de moeder van de bruid' (Klein and Krups meet the mother of the bride). The narrative perspective cuts back and forth between the two protagonists throughout this chapter and the two narrative situations (intra- and extradiegetic) by means of which both are consistently represented. It is only in this chapter

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<sup>226</sup> "Moraal verschaffende literatuur." Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman*, 166.

<sup>227</sup> "De mensen met geld en invloed, die hooggeleid zijn, [...], die een goede baan hebben, die steeds meer op de hoogte zijn van de ellende in de wereld en steeds openlijker onmachtig zijn daaraan iets te doen." Fleur Speet, 'Wij, heren van stand'. In: *De morgen* 23-5-2007. Quoted in Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman*, 178.

that Bodo and Alexei are physically in the same space. The circumstance that brings them together is Alexei's lecture in London. Within Bodo's story, the meeting between the protagonists is framed as a consequence of a task set to Bodo by his boss, Kirstin Elias. He is on an intelligence-gathering mission which consists of attending Alexei's lecture. The parts of this chapter narrated by Alexei are an account of him giving a lecture in London where he is confronted with the moral consequences of his research into datafication by a person in the audience, a woman characterized by means of Bodo's focalization as dressed in "blue empire cocktail dress that Colette would have called a mother-of-the-bride dress."<sup>228</sup> This is Augusta McGowan, the woman referred to in the title of the chapter as "the mother of the bride."<sup>229</sup> The implication of this contamination of different narrative levels (chapter title and a passage focalized by a character represented by an extradiegetic narrator) is that the extradiegetic narrator has access to Bodo's mind and that he uses snippets of his protagonist's thoughts as chapter headings. This can be seen as a play with the narrative perspective and fictional worlds.

The layering of levels of narrative worlds and the metafictional play that Februari engages in adds another facet to the interpretive challenge we are dealing with. The author intensifies this play by creating confusion around genres. Alexei as a narrator creates a web of possible interpretations of the book he is writing. At the beginning of his story of rise to fame, he mentions having always had a plan to write a book: "Because although for a year now I've been occupied with research that - that much was clear - was to lead to a book, I had not known that I was ready to talk about it with one of the greatest crooks of the publishing world."<sup>230</sup> The Rupert Murdoch of Alexei's world is called Schneider, an editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Eligo*. Alexei's book about which he strikes a pre-publication deal with Schneider is a non-fiction book for a wide audience:

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<sup>228</sup> "Blauwe empire cocktailjurk, die Colette een moeder-van-de-bruid-jurk zou noemen." Februari, *Klont*, 132.

<sup>229</sup> "De moeder van de bruid." Februari, *Klont*, 122.

<sup>230</sup> "Want hoewel ik al een jaar bezig was met het onderzoek dat – zoveel was duidelijk – tot een boek moest leiden, wist ik niet dat ik bereid was daarover te praten met een van de grootste schurken van de dagbladjournalistiek." Februari, *Klont*, 44.

‘I am writing a book [...]’ I said. [...]  
‘What’s it going to be called?’ he asked. [...]  
‘Clump,’ I said.<sup>231</sup>

There is a parallel between the title of Alexei’s book and the novel with the same title that the reader is currently making their way through. This can cause the reader to question the status of information and knowledge that he gains by reading the novel. We will return to this metafictional aspect and the play with genres later on in the conclusion where it will play a significant role in the implications that reading from different readerly positions can have for the final interpretation.

Halfway through the novel, Alexei makes clear that his analysis of the processes of datafication in terms of a story about klont that “is bent on evil”<sup>232</sup> is not the only one possible nor one that is true. He has another understanding of ‘klont’ which he keeps to himself and when voices of other experts in the novel react to it, the reader concludes that Alexei’s voice is not completely reliable nor authoritative within the scientific community. At the end of the story, the falseness and unsubstantiatedness of Alexei’s conclusions is confirmed by both narrative voices. The extradiegetic narrator shows this through a scene from Bodo’s world. Bodo’s colleague Nas, a young engineer at the Ministry of Security finds proof that Alexei is a plagiarist and a fabricator of scientific results about datafication. Ironically, Nas shares this news with the world via a newspaper, *Eligo*, where Alexei previously published his ideas about the threats of datafication. This is how the two narratives and fictional worlds that do not have many intersections (the characters do not meet each other except once) manage to complement each other. In the following two sections of this chapter, I will read the novel from two different, consciously assumed attitudes, a paranoid and a reparative one. In this way, I am going to point out another level at which oscillation functions in contemporary novels and investigate the interplay between the textual signals and reader’s attitude for the interpretation by combining the concept of foregrounding with oscillation again. On a theoretical level, I am thus exploring two different conceptions of the dominant: in this chapter I am focusing on the dominant as a readerly attitude, whereas in the previous chapter its function as a structuring textual principle has been explored.

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<sup>231</sup> “‘Ik schrijf een boek [...]’ zei ik. [...].

‘Hoe gaat dat boek heten?’ vroeg hij [...].

‘Klont,’ zei ik.” Februari, *Klont*, 44 – 46.

<sup>232</sup> “Kwaad in de zin heeft.” Februari, *Klont*, 147.

Because of the parallel plotlines, each with a slightly different narrative world and narrative situation, the novel invites and enables an oscillating reading. Each chapter calls for and rewards a different readerly position; Alexei's chapters about a plagiarizing scandal of a suspicious and untrustworthy public intellectual cause the reader to be suspicious of his claims and wary of falling for his manipulative tricks. Bodo's chapters on the other hand cause an affective reaction in the reader – in my case, it was sometimes pity, at other times bafflement and incomprehension, occasionally even irritation. These reactions can be a cause for reflection on one's readerly position – the predilections, assumptions, even prejudices that each of us steps into the encounter with the text with. By alternating the narrative situations and worlds chapter by chapter, the novel causes the reader to oscillate regularly between these two readerly attitudes. This oscillation is crucial for the interpretation of *Klont*, because it will help to resolve the uncertainty that the text creates caused by the question which of the two narrators (Alexei Krups, or the extradiegetic narrator) is the ultimate narrator of the novel and which one can be trusted. This question cannot be answered by looking purely at the foregrounding in the novel's text, as we have done in chapter 1, because the text of *Klont* is deliberately made too ambiguous to conclusively resolve the narrator-issue. Fortunately, the concept of the dominant does contain aspects that will help us to resolve the issue. For that, however, it is necessary to theorize the concept of the dominant as a readerly position.

### 3.1.2 Theorizing available readerly positions

What do I mean with the term readerly position or readerly attitude that I have been using so far? It has gained an important role for the analysis of *Klont* because of hints left by others who have also used the concept of the dominant, namely McHale and Demeyer and Vitse. McHale feels the need to deconstruct the “deterministic and imperialistic language”<sup>233</sup> by means of which Jakobson introduces the concept and points out a way to an even more thorough deconstruction. He focuses on positionality: “different dominants emerge depending upon [...] the position from which we interrogate it.”<sup>234</sup> This extension of the term dominant has recently been further developed by Demeyer and Vitse in their 2018 article “De affectieve dominant Een ideologiekritische lezing van recent Nederlandstalig proza” (The affective dominant. A reading of recent Dutchophone novels by means of critique of ideology) where they quote the same text from McHale and define the position of the reader as “effect of the way of reading”.<sup>235</sup> These

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<sup>233</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 6.

<sup>234</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 6.

<sup>235</sup> “Effect van de leeswijze.” Demeyer en Vitse (2018), 225.

methodological remarks notwithstanding, there is a problem with the method of foregrounding by means of which both McHale and Demeyer and Vitse predominantly propose to establish the dominant question governing a literary text. The problem is that it is impossible to conclusively prove that it is solely the literary text itself that foregrounds a dominant question.

If the reader has decided to look for ontological or affective questions in the text, this is (to a certain extent) what will become foregrounded to them. I want to build on Demeyer and Vitse's insight of calling the affective dominant a consequence of readerly attitude to demonstrate how the interpretation of a literary text can change depending on the position or attitude of the reader. It is by means of the emphasis on the readerly attitude that the dominant can be further deconstructed and its structuralist aspects dismantled. On this level, continuities play a role, too – the need that I feel to deconstruct the dominant even further can be seen as a consequence of having been trained in poststructuralism and having absorbed its insights into the nature of literary analysis. The continuity with poststructuralism is also part of my readerly attitude and the thing that makes me want to focus on the aspect of the readerly attitude as a means to deconstruct the overly structuralist implications of the dominant.

Working with the foregrounding by means of readerly position gives the reader the opportunity to reflect on what questions they are asking. By using a readerly position as a tool, I can reflect on my own first affective reaction to the reading of the text, which I have sketched above. Thus, unlike Demeyer and Vitse, my use of the affective dominant is also going to include affect on the level of readerly attitude in the process of interpretation, which is something their ideologically critical approach sidesteps. When one focuses on the relationship between language and reality, as critique under the influence of the linguistic turn did, it leads to posing questions about reality or fictionality of the worlds presented in fiction, in short to questions of representation. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski points out, that the “unreliability of signs secures the permanence of suspicion”<sup>236</sup> in a style dominating literary critique that she refers to as the hermeneutics of suspicion. This suspicion leads to “a desire to puncture illusions, topple idols, and destroy divinities”.<sup>237</sup> Thus, the critic focusing on critique of representation circumvents their chance at “extracting sustenance from the objects of culture”<sup>238</sup> that can

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<sup>236</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

<sup>237</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 32.

<sup>238</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150.

produce and provide knowledge too, such as descriptions of character's affects, the complexity of human relationships and insight into one's own affects and values.

Departing from the extension of the concept of the dominant, I want to enrich the questions suggested by Demeyer and Vitse by means of which they define the affective dominant: "How can I feel and experience reality (myself, the other, the past)?"<sup>239</sup> with one more question that does reflect the affective involvement of the reader with the event of reading: How does the text affectively move me as a reader? I am going to examine how the influence of the reader's intention or predilection for reading from a certain kind of position or attitude influences foregrounding, which then results in a certain type of knowledge produced by the interpretation of the literary text. I am going to designate two broad types of readerly attitude that form the poles of oscillation on the level of readerly attitude.

In the first chapter, I have mapped claims made in a debate about literary historiography. With the shift of attention to the readerly attitude, I need to tap into a different debate, one about the task and methodology of "criticism after the linguistic turn"<sup>240</sup> to which people like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Rita Felski have contributed. The legacy of Sedgwick's thought appears in two different debates, one of them (the task of literary criticism after theory) is relevant here; another will be discussed later, namely her contribution to the affective turn and affect theory. In an important essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" published in 2003 in a collection of essays *Touching Feeling*<sup>241</sup> Sedgwick speaks of two positions. She borrows this term from Melanie Klein and defines it as "the characteristic posture that the ego takes up with respect to its objects."<sup>242</sup> She introduces the term reparative reading as an alternative to the methodology of queer studies used by her which has features of paranoia. According to Sedgwick, the affective impulse behind hermeneutics of suspicion, that has become a "widespread critical habit, [...] by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself" is paranoid.<sup>243</sup>

In her analysis of the affective impulse behind this "style of thought"<sup>244</sup> Sedgwick is drawing on Melanie Klein's idea of positions as opposed to "fixation points in the developmental

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<sup>239</sup> "Hoe kan ik de realiteit (mezelf, de ander, het verleden) voelen en ervaren?" Demeyer and Vitse "De affectieve dominant," 223.

<sup>240</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

<sup>241</sup> Sedgwick has however worked out the first ideas that would later become published as this essay much earlier, in 1995, as Robyn Wiegman points out.

<sup>242</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, , 128.

<sup>243</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, , 124.

<sup>244</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 10.



phases”<sup>245</sup> which an infant regresses or progresses to in a Freudian view of psychoanalysis. Klein’s idea of a position is useful both for Sedgwick’s application and for mine because it describes a “changing and heterogeneous relational stance [...]”.<sup>246</sup> In the present case, the object is the novel *Klont* and the position or attitude that I as a reader can assume towards it is either paranoid or reparative. Regarding my inquiry into the various ways in which contemporary Dutch novels can be said to oscillate, Sedgwick’s use and specification of the two positions and the option that the expansion of the dominant concept offers, enables me to interrogate the novel’s text either via a reparative or paranoid attitude. Approaching the novel’s text (whose formal features accommodate the assumption of both positions) from these two angles, will allow me to draw conclusions about the functioning of oscillation on the level of readerly attitude.

What are the characteristics of the reparative and the paranoid position? The paranoid impulse that can be traced behind the hermeneutics of suspicion,<sup>247</sup> most of theory and the ideological critique used by Demeyer and Vitse can be characterized by several features, according to Sedgwick. The most significant one seems to me its anticipatory nature: “The first imperative of paranoia is: there must be no bad surprises.”<sup>248</sup> In its encounter with the object, the paranoid reader anticipates and thus pre-empts the impact of the dirty tricks that the narrator or the representations in the text might have in store for them. Secondly, paranoia, on Sedgwick’s view, is a “theory of a negative affect”.<sup>249</sup> She supports this claim by referring to the depressive position that Klein characterizes as the “infant or adult [...] mov(ing) toward a sustained seeking of pleasure [...] rather than continu(ing) to pursue the self-reinforcing, because self-defeating strategies for forestalling pain offered by the paranoid-schizoid position.”<sup>250</sup> From the paranoid position, it is therefore impossible to approach the object as offering anything other than the reiteration of the worst bad news that the reader is already expecting and has seen operating in the world. When Sedgwick talks about paranoia, she characterizes it also as an “epistemological practice”<sup>251</sup> – as a methodology, that is, paranoia produces a certain type of knowledge. The knowledge that one gains by means of an analysis from the paranoid position is knowledge of

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<sup>245</sup> Robert Hinshelwood, *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (Free Association Books: 1989), 394. Quoted in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>246</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, , 128.

<sup>247</sup> In her book *Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski reflects at length on the relationship between hermeneutics of suspicion and critique and the affective charge that characterizes both these styles of engaging literary texts.

<sup>248</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

<sup>249</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 136.

<sup>250</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 137.

<sup>251</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

the relation between the text and the world. Drawing on Sedgwick's thought and applying this difference between positions to literary critique as an activity, Felski describes the affective impulse behind critique as a mode of textual engagement as "guarded, tense, wary, defensive".<sup>252</sup>

The reparative reading that Sedgwick bases on Klein's thoughts about the depressive position is "an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult [...] succeeds in inhabiting."<sup>253</sup> The reparative position enables the exploration of the personal involvement of the reader with the text and the range of personal predilections and preferences that they bring to reading. This will involve a receptivity to both textual clues about the affective experience of the characters and paying attention to the impact that the reading of the novel *Klont* has on the reader (in this case me). The relational stance that the reparative position allows the reader to assume towards the object (the literary text) can "offer one nourishment and comfort".<sup>254</sup> Both the paranoid and reparative reading are regimes of knowledge production that each produce their own distinctively flavoured knowledge. The knowledge that can be gained in an analysis and interpretation of the literary text from the reparative position is more internally, affectively and reflectively oriented and can include other effects too, as explored by Felski in *Uses of Literature*. My exploitation of the term 'readerly attitude' leads to an exploration of my own personal meanings and preferences within the process of reading. These will become clear in the course of my analysis of the novel, especially where I assume the reparative readerly attitude.

### 3.2 Paranoid reading

I will now turn my attention to the parts of the novel that signal the possibility of assuming a paranoid attitude. This attitude is assumed especially where the novel creates the chance to recognize in its fictional world a reflection of the reality we live in and offers a critical mirror to it. Here, the novel partakes in „the epistemological focus of the (post)modern literature of the twentieth century.“<sup>255</sup> The critical reflection of reality presented in the novel can be seen as part of the tradition of social realism that produces certain type of knowledge about the world. Within this tradition, knowledge is produced cognitively, in relation to epistemological frameworks. The question of referentiality and representation in such socially critical realistic

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<sup>252</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 38.

<sup>253</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>254</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>255</sup> "De epistemologische focus van de (post)moderne literatuur van de twintigste eeuw." Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 14.

works is thus paramount. Spurred by the recognition of their own world in the world of fiction and the text's critical reflection of the world, the reader, will thus view the text "as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure"<sup>256</sup>, an attitude typical for the paranoid affect behind hermeneutics of suspicion, according to Felski. There is a correlation between the extent to which the novel is recognized as realistic and the assumption of the paranoid position to the text. The representation of a fictional world recognizable as similar to ours invites social, ideological critique. From this point of view, the text of *Klont* can be seen as entering a debate about a current social issue and taking a stance in it.

This subchapter will first look for the textual clues given in Alexei's storyline that call for an assumption of a paranoid attitude and that relate the novel to an epistemological frame<sup>257</sup>. Among these clues are critical evaluations of Alexei's fulfilment of the role of scientist and public intellectual by other characters or when he himself admits having shady motivations for making certain claims during the presentation of his scientific research. The emphasis on referentiality and the relationship between the text and reality leads to viewing the novel as formulating critique on the processes and mechanisms that allow such voices as Alexei's to gain prominence in the public sphere. The assumption of the paranoid, critical stance to the text further leads the reader to view even such parts of the text as revealing or pointing towards critique where there is no direct textual support for this, thus illustrating the functioning and the productivity of the paranoid position in the process of generating knowledge. This principle is illustrated by the novel's staging of a character that provides an illuminating critique of Alexei's public appearances but is himself also implicated in and profiting from the unfair system that allows Alexei to gain his platform. First therefore, the text makes the reader assume a wary, defensive and mistrustful attitude because the danger of being hoodwinked by the representation looms large. Subsequently, the text does not even have to produce the paranoid meanings itself, the reader has already been primed for this type of reading and will produce the paranoid knowledge themselves, even at the smallest hint. In the following paragraphs, I will try to distinguish both phases of the interaction between the text and the readerly attitude.

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<sup>256</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 11.

<sup>257</sup> Epistemological frame is here used in the same sense as it is used by Demeyer and Vitse as a reference to any type of critical theory (post-colonial, Marxist) that produces knowledge by engaging critically with the problems of the world.

### 3.2.1 Paranoid reading: induced by the text

The text emphasizes the necessity to assume a cognitive, critical focus on the relationship between the text and the world when the chapters of the novel focused on Alexei expose the principles and thought processes by means of which he is trying to make his research approachable, attractive and relevant. Alexei wraps his research conclusions in a narrative with clearly designated roles for the good and bad guys: “At the time [...] the threat of government control gone rogue was the issue of the day. My only task [...] was to make a drama out of it, one with characters, storylines and a developed plot.”<sup>258</sup> Alexei’s explicit ruminations about how to present his research so that it speaks to as many people as possible, expose his desire for fame and glory which makes him untrustworthy. The impact of this type of presentation on the audience is exactly such as Alexei wishes: “While they also easily understood what he was saying, because that was what the young speaker was out to do.”<sup>259</sup> At the same time, Alexei admits that the developments in the field of datafication are so fast, and that the consequences of the use of big data are so complicated, that no single person is able to fully describe, analyse or predict the impact that this will have on society: “As I mentioned earlier, I did not know much about it back then. But knowledge had not been of the utmost importance for some time now. Nobody knew what to say about all this new technology and therefore all that I said was welcome.”<sup>260</sup> The realization that the scientific consensus in this area is still developing and the reflection on the social consequences that his commentary will have should make a public intellectual careful and responsible about the presentation of his research. That is however not at all Alexei’s attitude; he sees his chance for a breakthrough and fame and grabs it with both hands: “No one wanted the truth, they wanted agitation. The point was that I needed to make sure that attention was being paid to it. That it could get big, the issue, and important [...]”<sup>261</sup> The shamelessness with which Alexei exploits the gap in the market is exposed in the last sentence of the quotation.

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<sup>258</sup> “In die tijd [...] was de dreiging van op hol geslagen overheidscontrole het onderwerp van de dag. Mijn enige taak [...] was daar een drama van te maken, met personages, verhaallijnen, plotontwikkelingen.” Februari, *Klont*, 190.

<sup>259</sup> “Terwijl ze tegelijk toch moeiteloos begrepen wat hij zei, omdat het de jonge spreker daar specifiek om te doen was.” Februari, *Klont*, 62.

<sup>260</sup> “Zoals ik al eerder zei, veel verstand had ik er toentertijd niet van. Maar verstand was allang niet meer het voornaamste. Geen mens wist iets verstandigs te zeggen over al die nieuwe technologie en daarom was alles wat ik zei welkom.” Februari, *Klont*, 190.

<sup>261</sup> “Niemand wilde de waarheid, ze wilden agitatie. Het ging er maar om dat ik er aandacht omheen kon organiseren. Dat het groot kon worden, het thema, en belangrijk [...]” Februari, *Klont*, 190.

The worst of Alexei's offences against scientific integrity that corroborates and justifies the attitude of suspicion in the reader is the fact that he has an insight into the nature of datafication that he does not share with his audience because it would not strike a note with their fears and anxieties, nor would it offer any possibility of agency to them. The klont that Alexei uses as a metaphor for phenomena and processes connected with the autonomously functioning systems using data and artificial intelligence is, in contrast to how it has previously been described both in the novel and in Alexei's lectures, "not a collection of data and clashing algorithms! It is a duplicate, a clone, an alternative world!"<sup>262</sup> This clone of reality consists of data derived out of human behaviour and decisions:

You take a person and translate them into personal data. [...] You translate money into financial data, a war into location data [...]. Finally, you have reduced all of reality into data about said reality. [...] You think you are holding the world in the palm of your hand, you chuck all the data into programmes and you let the programmes make autonomous decisions. First, you make them fully self-taught and self-controlling and thus they quickly take over. Now you've got a clone [...] of reality that is operating with full autonomy. This is the clump.<sup>263</sup>

Alexei however immediately realizes that this insight cannot be shared with the public: "Because the abstract story may well be astonishingly thrilling, it was also unbelievably boring: everyone would shrink away from me as soon as I started talking."<sup>264</sup> The knowledge that Alexei offers through his lectures is also paranoidly structured and when he gains an insight that does not offer anything actionable and that would force him to change the content of his popularizing lecture, Alexei fails the integrity test again. He is not going to jeopardize the successful formula that he has developed. He makes no use of his platform to share this deeper insight into the nature of datafication that might influence governments to make legislative changes that would protect their citizens from a detrimental use of data.

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<sup>262</sup> "Niet een verzameling data en botsende algoritmes! Het is een duplicaat, een kloon, een alternatieve wereld!" Februari, *Klont*, 148-149.

<sup>263</sup> "Je neemt een persoon en vertaalt die in persoonsgegevens. [...] Je vertaalt geld in financiële gegevens, oorlog in locatiegegevens [...] Uiteindelijk reduceer je de hele werkelijkheid tot gegevens óver die werkelijkheid. [...] je denkt dat je de hele wereld in je hand houdt, je stopt al je gegevens in programma's en die programma's laat je autonoom beslissen. Je maakt ze eerst volledig zelflerend en zelfsturend, en zo komt het dat ze al snel de controle overnemen. Nu heb je dus een kloon [...] van de werkelijkheid die volledig autonoom opereert. Dit is de klont." Februari, *Klont*, 143.

<sup>264</sup> "Want het abstracte verhaal was weliswaar onbegrijpelijk spannend, maar ook ongelofelijk saai: iedereen zou terugdeinzen zodra ik erover begon." Februari, *Klont*, 149.

Sedgwick claims that an effect of knowledge structured along paranoid lines functions as an impulse to action to those who receive it. She claims that one of the characteristics of the paranoid position is that it “places its faith in exposure,”<sup>265</sup> thus making a claim about political effectivity of this position or the reading that it produces. Sedgwick however also introduces the essay “Paranoid and Reparative Reading” with an anecdote that has made her describe the paranoid position and plead for the enrichment of the methodology of queer studies with reparative practices too.<sup>266</sup> In this way, Sedgwick realizes that the effectivity of the exposure of the truth as the proclaimed goal of the paranoid reading is not necessarily a viable or the most effective method of political resistance. We will return to the effectiveness of paranoia as a strategy of political resistance in section 3.2.3.

Another element that might reinforce and consolidate the paranoid position from which the reader is approaching the text is the staging of a character who is harbouring suspicions. This point of view is offered by Richard Harris, the editor-in-chief of a journal *Blink & Bluster*. Harris is shown watching Alexei’s lectures, attempting to maintain a rational detachment while feeling the effect of the speaker’s personal attractiveness:

It was not difficult to understand that it was precisely this combination of youth, fame and a future promise that made the speaker so immensely popular with the women – and, consequently, also with the men, who envied him, admired him and probably also desired him themselves. Richard Harris was surely not the only one in this hall who asked themselves whether the young star was interested in men or in women. Those clothes. That hair. [...] All-in all, the way that he was presenting caused not only some hetero-erotic shivers in the rows but also a hunch about homosexuality that did not do his image any disservice.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 138.

<sup>266</sup> The anecdote describes the attitude of her friend and AIDS activist, Cindy Patton, who did not necessarily see a train of actions following automatically from the paranoidly structured knowledge or suspicion that she had about the American government potentially using AIDS to target and wipe out the homosexual part of its population.

<sup>267</sup> “Het was niet moeilijk te begrijpen dat juist de combinatie van jeugdigheid, roem en toekomstbelofte de spreker zo mateloos populair maakte bij de vrouwen – en als gevolg daarvan ook bij de mannen, die hem benijdden, bewonderden en wellicht ook zelf begeerden. Richard Harris was vast niet de enige in zo’n zaal die zich afvroeg of de belangstelling van de jonge ster uitging naar mannen of naar vrouwen. Die kleren. Dat haar. [...] Alles bij elkaar opgeteld leidde zijn manier van presenteren niet alleen tot een hetero-erotische zinding in de rijen, maar ook tot een vermoeden van homoseksualiteit dat zijn imago bepaald geen slecht deed.” Februari, *Klont*, 61-62.

Harris describes the overall impression as “celebretiness”<sup>268</sup> and in confrontation with Alexei’s public performance, succeeds admirably in not being completely taken in by the way that Alexei as a public intellectual and scholar appeals more to the senses and affects rather than that he convinces by the thoroughness of his research: “There was something in the narrative of this kind of lecture that felt that tiny bit too disappointingly like gliding along the surface.”<sup>269</sup> This critical analysis makes the reader suspicious of Alexei’s claims and person early on in his storyline, especially since Harris is seen as having doubts as to the scientific integrity of Alexei’s writing.

Because Alexei is open about what motivates him to give the presentations of his research the particular spin that it has and because through Harris, the text gives a voice to the critical perspective on Alexei’s public activities, the novel exposes the mechanisms through which public interest for specific topics is generated in Alexei’s chapters. As a consequence of knowing these mechanisms, fame, wealth and status can be gained: “You must know when the fruit has ripened, is what the philosophers say. Not everyone has that talent, but I still think that I have really been able to enjoy the fruits in their prime”<sup>270</sup>, says Alexei in a self-congratulatory way. On the example of the two research conclusions, one of which is shared while the other remains private, we can also see the compromises in the area of scientific integrity to which the pursuit of fame can lead a public intellectual. By emphasizing the referentiality of these passages, the novel, read through the paranoid lens can be seen as reflecting on the mechanisms through which in our society, individuals with a sensational story are praised and offered a platform much more readily and often than someone who does the painstaking analytical work. The parts of the text that invite the assumption of a paranoid attitude lie rather on the surface; the text does not attempt to hide them.

### 3.2.2 Paranoid reading: produced by the reader

However, once the reader’s suspicions about Alexei’s visions of datafication are aroused, the reader can produce paranoid readings of the text even where the text does not present this evidence directly. This is the case where the reader’s paranoia shifts from being directed towards Alexei and moves to examine the motivations of other characters connected to him, such as Harris. After finding suspicious unattributed quotations in Alexei’s paper, Harris

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<sup>268</sup> “Celebretiness.” Februari, *Klont*, 62.

<sup>269</sup> “Er was iets in het verhaal van zo’n lezing dat net iets te teleurstellend langs de oppervlakte scheurde.” Februari, *Klont*, 62.

<sup>270</sup> “Je moet weten wanneer de vruchten rijp zijn, zeggen de filosofen. Niet iedereen is dat talent gegeven, maar ik denk toch echt dat ik de vruchten op hun hoogtepunt wist te genieten.” Februari, *Klont*, 36.

considers his options: “You could do two things in reaction to the existence of evil in the world [...] . Make a point of it. Or not make a point of it.”<sup>271</sup> He is weighing matters carefully and rationally but, in the end, also succumbs to the magnetism and lure of Alexei’s popularity and decides to engage the rising intellectual star for his journal, despite his doubts about Alexei’s scientific integrity. Implicitly, his behaviour illustrates the principle that contributes to corruption within institutions – once an idea or a person gains traction in the world, every platform wants in on the hype. The motivation to look closely at the claims that such a star is making is not high, because in case Harris’ journal would be the only one refusing to contact Alexei, they would lose a lot. Or, as Alexei succinctly puts it: “As long as we are on the rise, he will not be the first one to bring me down.”<sup>272</sup> Harris is just as implicated in the machinery that helps such people as Alexei gain a platform.

Although Alexei reports on Harris as someone who is “careful, solid, reliable and [...] rather clear about his principles”<sup>273</sup>, in this situation, the editor-in-chief does not withstand the temptation of having Alexei’s stardom reflect on his journal. The text shows Harris making this decision purely based on affect. He notices that his secretary is also not immune to the gravitational pull of Alexei’s charm based on her pronunciation of his name: “He heard her say Alexei, the ‘l’ a little thicker than normal, the ‘e’ a split-second longer and [...] glancing at her [...] he made his decision. To be honest, purely and solely based on the slightly longer ‘e’ of hers.”<sup>274</sup> In the end, even Harris, presented as a man of integrity and character, is swayed by the atmosphere of success and fame surrounding Alexei and despite his well-founded reasons to investigate his suspicions deeper, he gives this untrustworthy intellectual and plagiarizer yet another platform. Once the suspicions are aroused, the assumption of the paranoid position can lead to the production of more paranoid readings even where the text is keeping its suspicions to itself, such as in chapter ‘Dilemmas, dilemmas’. On the paranoid reading, the final judgement on the character of editor-in-chief Harris must be that he is precisely as impressionable as his assistant Estelle and as Alexei’s audiences and as susceptible to the siren calls of beauty, youth, charm and charisma. Moreover, because he is in a position of authority, this susceptibility has

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<sup>271</sup> “Tegenover het bestaan van het kwaad in de wereld kon je twee dingen doen [...]. Er een punt van maken. Of er geen punt van maken.” Februari, *Klont*, 63.

<sup>272</sup> “Zolang we nog in opkomst zijn, zal hij niet de eerste zijn om aan de neergang te beginnen.” Februari, *Klont*, 183.

<sup>273</sup> “Voorzichtig, gedegen, betrouwbaar en [...] vrij duidelijk over zijn principes.” Februari, *Klont*, 228.

<sup>274</sup> “Hij hoorde haar ‘Alexei’ zeggen, de ‘l’ iets dikker dan gewoonlijk, de ‘e’ een fractie langer aangehouden en [...] naar haar spiedend [...] nam hij een besluit. Eerlijk gezegd puur en alleen op basis van die iets verlengde ‘e’ van haar.” Februari, *Klont*, 65.



far more serious consequences and makes him more guilty of helping spread Alexei's false and manipulative take on the consequences of datafication.

Harris observes critically that part of Alexei's success is, that he engages the affects of his audiences. It is however not only the positive affects of his audiences, such as admiration and attraction that Alexei draws on to secure his position as a public intellectual. What makes klont such a timely and relevant topic to lecture on is that the image functions as a "an anxiety-provoking idea of the future",<sup>275</sup> as Rob Schouten observes in a review of *Klont*. Alexei apprehends the fears of his audience and taps into them by presenting the problems related to datafication through the image of klont that is personified and given agency. It is these negative affects of worry and fear that Alexei is able to tap into and that capture the attention of his audiences so that they flock to his lectures. In this sense, his manipulations and the use he makes of the widely shared concerns are reminiscent of those that a populist politician might tap into to present themselves as the saviour of his nation. Alexei is shown to be consciously designing his lecture in such a way as to connect to these fears: "Now I only need to tell them about the clump, about the uncontrollable computational power and the unmanageable activity of the objects and everyone will let my words sink in until they become part of the slimy bedding of the consciousness where fear grows."<sup>276</sup> The calculating and crooked way in which he plays with his audience's taste for sensationalism and on their fears without attempting to offer any real solution confirms and intensifies the paranoid position assumed with respect to the text. Even before the reader knows about the confirmation of the suspicions of plagiarism, the paranoid impulse is fed by many signals received from the text and intensified by paranoia's "wide reach and rigorous exclusiveness"<sup>277</sup> that makes it, in Sedgwick's words, "a strong theory".<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> "Angstig toekomstbeeld." Schouten, „Wint de roman van de robot?“ Thomas de Veen talks in similar terms about „uitvergrotingen van maatschappelijke angsten“ (magnification of social fears) in relation to another contemporary novel with dystopian elements, *Klifi* by Adriaan van Dis. See Thomas de Veen, „Een Nederland-van-overmorgen met dystopische trekjes“, *NRC*, published 18 February 2021, accessed 8 December 2021, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/02/18/kiezen-tussen-oprechte-woede-en-cynische-satire-a4032377?t=1638994258>.

<sup>276</sup> "Ik hoef nu alleen nog maar te vertellen over de klont, over oncontroleerbare rekenkracht en de onbeheersbare activiteit der dingen en iedereen laat de woorden inzinken totdat ze worden opgenomen door de slijmerige bodem van het bewustzijn waar de angst groeit." Februari, *Klont*, 78.

<sup>277</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 135.

<sup>278</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 133.

### 3.2.3 Paranoia as a regime of knowledge production

The way in which the paranoid position produces knowledge is modelled by one of the characters within Alexei's fictional world. In the portrayal of Fred Arkin, a genius mathematician and an expert in AI, there are similarities between his characterization and the functioning of the paranoid position as a regime of knowledge production. On one of the occasions that Alexei is invited to speak on the threats and opportunities of datafication, he encounters Fred in a format of a panel discussion. The differences between Fred's and Alexei's way of thinking and producing knowledge become clear during their encounter on the stage. Alexei gives a description of Fred's attitude behind which he senses a motivation to expose Alexei as a fraud. Fred poses a series of sharply probing and mistrustful questions and later launches into an exposé about the dangers of datafication for the democracy. Alexei observes the following about Fred: "Now he's taken it into his head that he has a political message. He will tell the people in the hall the truth [...]." <sup>279</sup> A serious elaboration on these consequences of datafication could and perhaps should be part of Alexei's message, were he not so concerned about his popularity. Unlike Alexei, Fred however does not let the expectations of the audience govern the content or form of his appearance and continues to dig deeper into statements that Alexei has made about datafication, following his own goal of exposing the truth.

Fred's single-minded pursuit of truth is connected with a suspicion that he entertains towards Alexei's output. Alexei becomes aware of that after a few minutes of their conversation:

A conversation is however the last thing on Fred's mind. Wanting to get to the bottom of something has a strong erotic charge and the tendency to look at the world with critical eyes a form of badassery; Fred has just reached the murky area where evil, criticism, erotics and violence come together. <sup>280</sup>

In this moment, Fred functions as a representation of the original paranoid impulse with which the forefathers of poststructuralism deconstructed the power of disciplining discourses and dismantled the welfare state. <sup>281</sup> Fred believes that his exposure of Alexei's "badassery" <sup>282</sup> is an

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<sup>279</sup> "Nu haalt hij zich in zijn hoofd dat hij een politiek boodschap heeft. Hij zal de mensen in de zaal de waarheid brengen [...]." Februari, *Klont*, 189.

<sup>280</sup> "Maar een gesprek is duidelijk het laatste waar Fred aan denkt. Ergens diep in willen doordringen is een sterk erotische kracht, en de neiging kritisch naar de wereld te kijken een vorm van slechtigheid; Fred heeft zojuist het duistere gebied betreden waar kwaad, kritiek, erotiek en geweld elkaar raken." Februari, *Klont*, 187.

<sup>281</sup> Sedgwick compares the demystifying spirit of the cultural theorists' work in the 1960 with the effectivity of this strategy in the cultural and political climate of the time when she first worked on the essay (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141-143), approximately halfway through the nineties (for a precise dating of the origination of the essay, see Wiegman "The Times We're In", 9).

<sup>282</sup> Slechtigheid." Februari, *Klont*, 187.

act of politically effective resistance and a way to take up the responsibility as a critically thinking citizen who has been given a platform. Fred's appearance in this context and on this occasion shows the paranoid position in action and portrays also some of the shortcomings of this "kind of epistemological practice".<sup>283</sup> Fred is consumed by his politically motivated expository drive to such an extent that it overrides the concern for the audience or the format of the event.

Fred's assumption of the paranoid position is apparently motivated by a sincere wish to expose the failings of capitalism and democracy and to share these insights with his audience: "He will tell the people in the hall the truth – [...] our government taps our calls because the companies need our data for the waging of economic wars".<sup>284</sup> Here, Fred is illustrating another facet of the paranoid position, namely its anticipatory nature: "because there must be no bad surprises and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be already known."<sup>285</sup> The fact that the bad news is no news for Fred's audience, becomes apparent shortly afterwards through Alexei's commentary. Alexei, whose perspective is a filter through which we have access to Fred and who is always hyperaware of the audience's expectations, reacts disparagingly to Fred's social critique: "My dear chap, methinks. Relax. Take a breath."<sup>286</sup> The nonchalance, cynicism and indifference characterizing his position is reflected by the audience for whom the scandals and shortcoming of the systems that Fred is exposing are already known:

Oh, dear Fred. In his zeal to unmask the misuse of power, he tells the audience about scandals and crimes that they know all about because they are personally responsible for them. He reveals to the heads of governments sat in the first row that governments have tapped the phones of their citizens. He informs the sheepish-looking CEO's that the information from these tapped phones is being channelled to companies.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>284</sup> "Hij zal de mensen in de zaal de waarheid brengen - [...] onze regering luistert ons af omdat bedrijven onze gegevens nodig hebben voor het voeren van economische oorlogen." Februari, *Klont*, 189.

<sup>285</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

<sup>286</sup> "Jongen toch, denk ik. Ontspan. Haal adem." Februari, *Klont*, 189.

<sup>287</sup> "Ach, mijn Fred. In zijn ijver machtsmisbruik te demaskeren vertelt hij het publiek over schandalen en misdaden die het allang kent omdat het er zelf verantwoordelijk voor is. Aan de regeringsleiders op de eerste rij onthult hij dat regeringen hun burgers afluisteren. Aan de schaapachtig kijkende CEO's [...] vertelt hij dat de resultaten van dat afluisteren worden doorgesluist naar bedrijven." Februari, *Klont*, 189.

When Alexei's and Fred's styles of engagement with the world are compared, it becomes clear that the former has given up on the paranoid style of critique. In contrast to Fred, Alexei is highly motivated to please the audience and fulfil their expectations because his goal during this lecture is not to expose or present the truth but to manage his image and increase his fame. He shapes his role as a public intellectual in a way that does not even attempt to threaten the status quo or hold up a mirror to power. He has found a way to flourish in an unfair, oppressive system and is going to enjoy the spoils. It is therefore not surprising, that Alexei's reaction to Fred is condescending and ironizing. Alexei thus represents an affective, populist public intellectual, someone who is no longer led by the expectation that the sharing of the knowledge they have collected would lead to any political change. He does not assume "that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, [...] phantasmatic, or even violent,"<sup>288</sup> as Sedgwick states. Fred is on the other hand a representation of an older type of public intellectual, perhaps comparable to the poststructuralist philosophers in an early phase of their careers when they still believed that exposure of truth about injustice would lead to political change.

In order to develop my analysis of Fred as a personification of the paranoid style of critique, as a specific "way, among other ways of seeking, finding and organizing knowledge"<sup>289</sup> it can be observed that Fred, "with his great big intellectual head",<sup>290</sup> whose intelligence Alexei sincerely admires and at the same time fears, lends his brainpower to the service of the paranoid impulse. He exposes to the public how the powers that be use data to oppress and discipline its citizens, in a way which is highly reminiscent of Sedgwick's description of the workings of a paranoid attitude in Foucault:

transforming the simultaneous chaos of institutions into a consecutive, drop-dead-elegant diagram [...] is also the paranoid subject's proffer of himself and his cognitive talent, now ready for anything it can present in the way of blandishment or violence, to an order of things *morcelé* that had until then only lacked a narratability, a body.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

<sup>289</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

<sup>290</sup> "Met zijn grote denkershoofd." Februari, *Klont*, 185.

<sup>291</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 132.

Fred creates a coherent, understandable narrative by lending his cognitive talent to an effort at assembling the jumbled and incoherent instances when power in western democracies steps outside of the bounds delimited to it by this democratic system. He organizes the instances of misuse of power that might at first sight seem chaotic and unconnected to reveal an alarming structure or narrative behind what would at first sight appear coincidental or as isolated instances. The sustained attention and intellect necessary for such a work is according to Sedgwick what gives the paranoid attitude such a durability and strength as a theory. By means of this paranoid reading of the situation, Fred also confronts Alexei with his failing to pay attention to exactly these instances of misuse of technology. Fred's attitude can be characterized by a quotation from Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, a source I will draw on later, where he paints the revolutionary spirit of the historical moment that gave birth to the assumption described by Sedgwick, namely that cultural theory could bring about political change: "The militant politicians of the 60s had been largely optimistic: if you desired intensely enough, you could achieve what you wanted. Utopia lay just beneath the cobblestones of Paris."<sup>292</sup>

In his already mentioned reaction to Fred's critique, Alexei echoes Sedgwick's realization that "paranoia's faith in demystifying exposure"<sup>293</sup> is inefficacious as a weapon of political or revolutionary struggle:

The paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends in addition on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings. What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?<sup>294</sup>

Alexei's wins the subsequent verbal altercation with Fred by harnessing the affects of his audience and his charisma as a speaker:

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<sup>292</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 51.

<sup>293</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 144.

<sup>294</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 141.

Just like you, I am a child of parents who [...] have had romantic ideals about self-actualization. [...] This is the type of nonsense that the people want to hear. The hall wakes up. Phones come to life.<sup>295</sup>

It is important to note here, that it is Alexei's goal to 'win' in this altercation with Fred and to defend his image by remaining true to his personable, affectively engaging style of sharing knowledge. His ascendancy in this confrontation between an old and a new type of public intellectual represents the decline of effectivity of critique or of the paranoid impulse as a "style of thought"<sup>296</sup> that Felski and Sedgwick are also exploring. Although Alexei wins this encounter in the eyes of the public opinion and although he voices this criticism of Fred that I connect with the declining effectiveness of the paranoid position as a weapon of political struggle, this does not mean that he has the moral high ground in this situation. In that respect, the critique of Alexei that Fred expresses rings true: "You say something about shoes and colour rinses. And you claim that you are giving an answer to all the greatest questions that the world is posing."<sup>297</sup> Despite the fact that Fred has a point and voices a valid critique of Alexei, his words do not resonate with the audience.

Alexei's story also offers an explanation for why the style of critique that Fred performs on this occasion does not land better with the audience and why the audience during his speech tweets "What sort of idiot is this?"<sup>298</sup> The paranoid style of critique does not appeal to the audience, not in this particular lecture hall, but perhaps also more in general, the novel seems to suggest. The world that *Klont* portrays as a reflection of reality is globalized, complicated, unstable, confusing and threatening. In such a world, the paradigm of the exceptionally brilliant individual who could offer solutions to the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is falling by the wayside. It is proving impossible for an individual to provide answers to such complicated subject matter as the consequences of datafication or the interaction with artificial intelligence. In his more honest and self-reflecting moments, it seems that Alexei realizes that too: "Sometimes, this awful thought occurs to me that no one has the mental capacity to even pose the right kind of

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<sup>295</sup> "Net als jij ben ik een kind van ouders die [...] romantische idealen hadden over zelfverwezenlijking [...]. Dit is het soort onzin dat de mensen willen horen. De zaal wordt wakker. Telefoons komen tot leven." Februari, *Klont*, 192.

<sup>296</sup> Felski *The Limits of Critique*, 149.

<sup>297</sup> "Je zegt iets over schoenen en kleurspoelingen. En je beweert dat je daarmee antwoord geeft op alle grote vragen die de wereld bezighouden." Februari, *Klont*, 193.

<sup>298</sup> "Wat is dat voor een idioot?" Februari, *Klont*, 190.

questions about the future that we are hurtling towards. Let alone that someone should have the beginning of an answer.”<sup>299</sup> Alexei’s moral failing as a public intellectual consists of his awareness of this fact and his decision to make use of the platform that he has obtained despite that. He does this by filling his lectures with a combination of anecdotes, stories, illustrations and factual information and passing this mix for scientific knowledge. An audience surrounded by an anxiety producing world is affectively primed for the reassuring and uncomplicated message such as Alexei’s personally inflected story about his upbringing; “that tripe about the summers of my youth”.<sup>300</sup>

The chapter “Alexei Krups slaat terug” (Alexei Krups strikes back) stages the conflict between these two types of scientists, Alexei representing a ‘new’ affective, populist public intellectual and Fred representing an ‘old’ type of public intellectual who believes in the effectivity of the exposure of the truth in the public sphere. The text also records the reactions of the audience and invites a questioning of circumstances that allow one person to be considered an ‘expert’ and gain a platform and popularity while the real expert remains in the shadows.

An attempt to correlate textual clues to larger social conditions”<sup>301</sup> is made by Fred who has used the hermeneutics of suspicion as his method to produce knowledge that he is sharing from the stage. For the audience, apparently, knowledge produced from this position is an old hat and it does not catch on. Sedgwick connects the limited effectiveness of this regime of knowledge production with the ubiquity of paranoia in political life: “To keep arriving on this hyperdemystified, paranoid scene with the ‘news’ of hermeneutics of suspicion, at any rate, is a far different act from what such exposures would have been in the 1960s”,<sup>302</sup> thus voicing a similar idea as Eagleton. One of the reasons why Fred’s message does not catch on with the audience is that it is already aware of all the “ruses of power”<sup>303</sup> that he is exposing to them. The complacency with and lack of outrage at the exposure of corruption within systems of power (both the government, “the heads of governments in the first row (and) the sheepish-

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<sup>299</sup> “Soms komt de gruwelijke gedachte bij me op dat geen mens de mentale capaciteiten bezit om zelfs maar de juiste vragen te stellen aan de toekomst die op ons toe raast. Laat staan dat iemand het begin van een antwoord heeft.” Februari, *Klont*, 220-221.

<sup>300</sup> “die kletspraat over de zomers van mijn jeugd.” Februari, *Klont*, 193.

<sup>301</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 96.

<sup>302</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 143.

<sup>303</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 140.

looking CEOs on the chairs next to them”<sup>304</sup>) is, according to Eagleton, an effect of postmodernism.

### 3.2.4 Ineffectiveness of public intellectuals assuming paranoid position in 21<sup>st</sup> century

In his book *After Theory*, Eagleton uses Marxist-oriented criticism, a branch of literary theory that is a prime example of the hermeneutics of suspicion, to point out the social impact of postmodernism’s theoretical claims. In this way, he illustrates Felski’s observation that the linking of characteristics of an object, in this case postmodernism, to the larger social conditions that influence it is a principle typical for critique. From the sociological point of view that Eagleton uses for his analysis, the heyday of postmodernism coincides with “the decline of the traditional middle class”.<sup>305</sup> Eagleton adds, that the spread of postmodern values in society in subsequent years “reflects a real social change. It is one result of the apparent disintegration of old-fashioned bourgeois society into a host of sub-cultures.”<sup>306</sup> Thus, Eagleton identifies a larger sociological cause and goes on to elucidate the general effect of postmodern values in the population: “In this social order, then, you can no longer have bohemian rebels or revolutionary avant-gardes because they no longer have anything to blow up. [...] Instead, the non-normative has become the norm.”<sup>307</sup> To make the relationship between this foray into sociology via Eagleton and *Klont* clear, Fred Arkin is the type of a revolutionary avant-gardist preaching truth to power. The problem illustrated by the underwhelming reaction of the audience in *Klont* is that no one cares about the truth. How come? Eagleton continues: “The norm now is money; but since money has absolutely no principles or identity of its own, it is no kind of norm at all. It is utterly promiscuous and will happily tag along with the highest bidder.”<sup>308</sup> This principle is illustrated by Alexei who is seen actively choosing not to occupy the position Fred does, but instead develops a new type of content that serves him in his ultimate ambition: a quest for fame and money.

Felski observes in art the same change that Eagleton accounts for sociologically: “Irony and irreverence saturate TV dramas and talk shows; conspiracy theories spawn on the Internet; a

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<sup>304</sup> “De regeringsleiders op de eerste rij (en) de schaapachtig kijkende CEO’s op de stoelen naast hen.” Februari, *Klont*, 189.

<sup>305</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, 16.

<sup>306</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, 16.

<sup>307</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, 16.

<sup>308</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, 16–17.



nonchalant coolness and world-weariness sets the tone in fashion and music.”<sup>309</sup> The consequences of the specific flavour of postmodern cultural production is that it has led to the “widespread disillusionment about the motives of politicians and public figures”.<sup>310</sup> What then, “is the use of demystifying ideology when many people no longer subscribe to coherent ideologies, [...] when ‘everyone knows’ that hidden forces are at work making us think and behave in certain ways?”<sup>311</sup> asks Felski. With a public that knows this and is still lacking the will or motivation for political struggle, there is no need or appreciation for “the brave lone voice of intellectual scepticism”<sup>312</sup> that Fred Arkin represents in *Klont*.

At this point in my paranoid reading, I need to point out another feature of the paranoid position. Felski draws attention to the fact that a text seen from the paranoid position is always either “boldly subverting or cravenly sustaining the status quo”.<sup>313</sup> When the task of interpretation of literary texts is understood as the need to relate the representation in texts to what is perceived of reality, one must start referring to other sources of knowledge to point out the relevant aspects of reality. I have just done the same by using Eagleton’s and Felski’s ideas to bolster my interpretation of *Klont* in terms of the relationship between representation and reality. Again, the question of the relationship between the fictional and the real world through representation has played a paramount role in this analysis. We see the same principle in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* where the authors refer to a substantial amount of sociological, philosophical, political, economic and cultural analyses to substantiate their ideological critique.

The framework of crisis used by Demeyer and Vitse as a point of departure for the analysis of contemporary novels informed by the ideologically critical focus, bears stronger resemblance to the paranoid position than the reparative one that they claim to also assume. In the introductory chapter to *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*, Demeyer and Vitse intend giving reparative reading space in their project:

Our ideologically critical approach involves also what Eve K. Sedgwick (2003) calls a reparative movement: we invite the imaginary solutions and affective strategies that literary texts offer us in order to deal with conflictual situations and experiences of crisis

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<sup>309</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 46.

<sup>310</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 46.

<sup>311</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 46.

<sup>312</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 46.

<sup>313</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 11.

that they represent and in which their authors work. We do not read novels only as symptoms or objects that need to be unmasked, but also as subjects that are seeking and offering manners of reparation – to us as well.<sup>314</sup>

The way that Demeyer and Vitse characterize reparative reading in the introduction is characteristic for the way in which they later use it for analysis. They understand looking with the authors for suggested solutions to (political, collective) problems in the world as reparation.

However, as the wording in the quotation above tellingly suggests, the affective strategies that register when using the ideologically critical lens, are those encountered in situations of conflict or crisis. The problems in the novels are seen from the ideologically critical perspective that helps to historicize (in the sense used by Jameson) and leads “to an epistemological framing of the current situation”<sup>315</sup> within which the affective problems are described. The abundant use of the philosophical, theoretical and sociological sources with which they attend to the affective content in the novels of the millennial generation, continually explaining them in relation to the wider cultural, social, economic and political circumstances, is much more in tune with the characteristics of the paranoid position as outlined by Felski and Sedgwick. The reparation that Demeyer and Vitse say they are seeking in and through the texts mostly has to do with solutions to problems connected with failing, or absent political or collective spheres: “Nevertheless, in the course of this study we have seen different affective strategies that the novels foreground as a possible solution to the issues that they represent.”<sup>316</sup> If novels contain affective scenarios that Demeyer and Vitse consider to be useful ways to resist the neoliberal capitalist system, this is considered a reparation. It is only insofar that Demeyer and Vitse consider the novels not only as objects for analysis but also as sources of hope and resistance.

As I understand reparation, I do not think that it is possible to combine an ideologically critical approach with a reparative reading. The mapping of the relationship between affect and the social context in which affect is explained as a reaction to or a consequence of the social circumstances is insightful and valuable, but it contributes to a reparation only in one sense, namely the reparation of the world in political sense. The reparation that is going to characterize

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<sup>314</sup> “Tot onze ideologiekritische benadering behoort dan ook wat Eve K. Sedgwick (2003) een reparatieve beweging noemt: we staan open voor de imaginaire oplossingen en affectieve strategieën die literaire teksten aanreiken om met de conflictueuze situaties en crisiservaringen om te gaan die ze verbeelden en waarin hun auteurs werken. We lezen romans niet slechts als symptomen of objecten om te ontmaskeren, maar evengoed als subjecten die herstel mogelijkheden zoeken en bieden – ook aan ons.” Demeyer en Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 37.

<sup>315</sup> “Tot een epistemologische kadering van de huidige situatie.” Demeyer en Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 288.

<sup>316</sup> “In de loop van deze studie hebben we niettemin verschillende affectieve strategieën gezien die romans naar voren schuiven als mogelijke oplossing voor hun problematiek.” Demeyer en Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 287.

the other position between which my reading is going to oscillate on the level of readerly attitude is much less focused on the world, politics and other collective efforts. My reparative attitude focuses on the level of individual relationships where the relation between the reader and the characters represented in the texts can simulate relations between real human beings in the world. This is why I am examining the textual foregrounding of the dominant separately from the foregrounding which can be traced back to the readerly attitude and why I am developing a way (via reparative reading) of putting the reader's affect back into the affective dominant. Now, however, the pendulum of oscillation has reached one of its poles and is beginning to swing the other way. Let us therefore see what a reparative reading of *Klont* might look like.

### 3.3 Reparative reading

The chapters focused on Bodo's fictional world that are regularly alternating with chapters narrated by Alexei force the reader to oscillate between two attitudes. The reader's paranoid position, assumed when reading Alexei's chapters that make designs on their sympathy and that require vigilance and suspicion towards the claims made in his lectures, may become softened into empathy for Bodo by the second chapter of his storyline. A novel which begins on the day that one of its protagonists has planned to end his life requires the reader to pay attention to his affective life that might have caused this affective crisis. The social and political reasons for Bodo's crisis could of course also be traced, but then we would not be engaging in reparative reading, as I have defined it. I have identified various characteristics of Bodo's that might be seen as a possible reason to commit suicide. These are characteristics that Demeyer and Vitse's methodology would probably not attempt to make meaning of or would interpret in the light of a reference to a social or political problem.

Bodo is depressed, struggles with a sense of "his own individual redundancy in life"<sup>317</sup> and is an idealist who has "high standards for his own actions in the world".<sup>318</sup> This may be one of the reasons why he has started working at the Ministry of Security; "to serve the common good".<sup>319</sup> Such work would agree with an idealist like Bodo who "still finds that it is his task to contribute to the happiness of others."<sup>320</sup> Small wonder that he becomes disillusioned with this work when the public institution of the Ministry becomes an instrument serving "the rise of the surveillance

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<sup>317</sup> "Zijn eigen, individuele overbodigheid in het leven." Februari, *Klont*, 21.

<sup>318</sup> "Stelt [...] hoge eisen aan zijn handelen in de wereld." Februari, *Klont*, 22.

<sup>319</sup> "Om het algemeen belang te gaan dienen." Februari, *Klont*, 31.

<sup>320</sup> "Vindt nog steeds dat hij tot taak heeft het geluk van anderen te bevorderen." Februari, *Klont*, 31-32.

state”.<sup>321</sup> The chapters focusing on Bodo contain a portrayal of a person in crisis who has in some sense survived the wish to end to his own life. This crisis culminating in his decision to send a suicide note results in an emotional and relational fallout that Bodo continues to deal with throughout the novel.

The reparative reading of this novel will not focus on the questions of referentiality or representation but on the relationship between the text and the reader. In an effort to produce reparatively structured knowledge, reading from this position will reassemble the text by means of mapping previously unnoticed motifs. The novel portrays deeply human concerns such as childbearing and fatherhood through the consciousness of a 21<sup>st</sup> century individual. However, with the shift away from issues of representation and referentiality, with the focus on the dominant as a readerly position and as part of the process of putting the reader’s affect back into the affective dominant, reparative reading means that I, as a reader, must also become engaged in the process of interpretation. As a consequence of this, my reparative position also creates space for a reflection on the readers’ predilections and pre-assumed attitudes. As an affectively engaged and reparatively positioned reader, it is my predilection to consider these aspects first in the choice of passages that become foregrounded in the text because of my readerly position.

The framework of crisis introduced by Demeyer and Vitse, is a useful point of departure for the analysis of Bodo’s affective experience. From the reparative position, I will however focus on the individual, personal circumstances that contribute to the crisis. By mapping these circumstances, I aim to have my reading from the reparative position produce a specific reparatively structured knowledge in accordance with Sedgwick’s thinking of reparation as an epistemological practice or, in other words, a regime of knowledge production. This also makes me pay attention to aspects of the novel unexplored in previous analyses. Scholarly attention has namely mostly been focused on the places where the novel intersects with current political, social and technological challenges, emphasizing the epistemologically critical focus on the relation of the text to reality, thus mirroring the paradigm of critique. The recently published criticism of the novel shows a preference for the paranoidly structured knowledge gleaned from *Klont*. In their analyses of the novels, academic critics have mostly focused on the fact that the novel deals critically with current topics such as datafication, scientific integrity and the

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<sup>321</sup> “De opkomst van de controlestaat.” Februari, *Klont*, 31.

functioning of the public sphere. From the four articles that the search for the term *Klont* has yielded in the database Bibliografie van de Nederlandse taal- en literatuurwetenschap (Bibliography of Dutch linguistics and literary criticism), there are two that pay some degree of attention to the private circumstances and individual affective experiences of Bodo Klein. In comparison to the other themes of the novel, this aspect is covered only marginally. Still, the reparative reading focusing on Bodo's affects from an individual perspective adds new aspects to the prevailing trend in criticism and reception of this novel.

From this perspective, Vervaeck's review of *Klont*<sup>322</sup> is the richest source because unlike other sources, it describes Bodo's private life, circumstances and character. However, the amount of space dedicated to Bodo is about three times less than that dedicated to the description of Alexei's plotline, the problem of big data and the interaction between the theme of the novel (datafication) and a currently ongoing public debate. A smattering of attention to Bodo's personal concerns, subjectivity and isolation is also paid in the position paper "Searching for New Weapons? Dutch Studies under Late-Modern Conditions" written by Esther Op de Beek and Bram Ieven in which *Klont* is one of the case studies. Bodo's attempts to assess his self-image and thinking critically are used to illustrate the effect of the "erosion of the political"<sup>323</sup> in the private sphere which is seen as an "affective structure"<sup>324</sup> characterizing the late-modern conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The article thus shows Bodo's private concerns only as a reflection of larger social forces at play in contemporary life and as a direct consequence of these. The last two sources, Koen Rymenants' extended review and the interview by Lucas van der Deijl with Stephan about novels on datafication mention Bodo only in passing and very briefly. In Rymenants's review, Bodo's private life is an afterthought summed up in three sentences at the end of the text.<sup>325</sup> The fact that Besser focuses more on the political and social aspects of the novel rather than the individual affects is understandable given the topic of the interview. Besser does however mention *Klont*'s "surprisingly humanistic side",<sup>326</sup> which is a

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<sup>322</sup> Bart Vervaeck, "Een nieuwe Bint?" *De reactor*, published 31 October 2017, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://www.dereactor.org/teksten/een-nieuwe-bint>.

<sup>323</sup> Bram Ieven and Esther Op de Beek, "Searching for New Weapons? Dutch Studies under Late-Modern Conditions", *Journal for Dutch Literature* 10, no. 1 (2019), 87.

<sup>324</sup> Ieven and Op de Beek, "Searching for New Weapons?" 74.

<sup>325</sup> Koen Rymenants, "Betekenis zoeken in een vat gegevens" (Searching for Meaning in a Barrel Full of Data, *De Lage landen*, published 17 December 2019, accessed 16 January 2022, <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/betekenis-zoeken-in-een-vat-vol-gegevens.-klont-van-maxim-februari>).

<sup>326</sup> "Verbazingwekkend humanistische kant." Lucas van der Deijl, "De zon, de *Klont* en de cloud. De beste romans over dataficatie volgens Stephan Besser", *De reactor*, published 6 September 2021, accessed 30 December 2021, <https://www.dereactor.org/teksten/de-zon-de-klont-en-de-cloud-de-boekentips-van-stephan-besser>.

shorthand for all the deeply human concerns plaguing Bodo, but perhaps also for the moral that the the novel confronts the reader with. The following reparative reading will focus precisely on these characteristically human concerns.

### 3.3.1 Empathy and reparation required: depression and suicidal ideation

In the selection of relevant passages for reparative reading, I have been led by the affective questions foregrounded in Bodo's chapters that mostly have to do with his experience of depression and suicidal ideation. From passages that describe these states, I have further selected those where the description of the protagonists' behaviour prompted a reaction of bafflement, incomprehension or irritation in me. Initially I have chosen two instances where the text required sustained attention and reassembly in order to yield reparatively structured knowledge that in this specific case leads to an insight into and understanding of Bodo's affective experience. This understanding than results in empathy and acceptance of his, at first baffling and irritating, behaviour. The first instance where the reparative reassembly was necessary connects the off-handed mention of Bodo's depression that needs to be accounted for with the interpretation of his suicide ideation, one of the conundrums that the text of the novel poses.

Bodo's suicide note with which the novel opens frustrates the reader's ability to understand and empathize with the affective scenario because of the lack of information that the text provides about Bodo's motivation to commit suicide. The sense of mystery pervading such a momentous decision and the lack of a conclusive explanation or motivation for Bodo's decision has made me focus on it and search for an explanation. Apart from the reasons for Bodo's suicide that I have shortly sketched above in the introduction to the novel, my search for an explanation has led me to notice a particular sort of affective scenario, namely Bodo's depression. Depression functions as an explanation for passages that might otherwise be skipped over and remain unaccounted for in an attempt at a generally convincing interpretation. The fact that Bodo is depressed is mentioned directly right at the beginning of his story: "At fifty-seven years of age, he functions on a system of anti-depressants that the psychiatrist has prescribed to him years ago."<sup>327</sup> Colette, his wife also mentions the "Polite, eighteenth-century version of melancholy,

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<sup>327</sup> "Op zijn zevenenvijftigste loopt hij op een system van antidepressiva dat de psychiater hem jaren geleden heeft voorgeschreven [...]." Februari, *Klont*, 23.

the elegant and bright form of despondency”<sup>328</sup> as one of Bodo’s defining characteristics. Not only can depression therefore serve as a factor contributing to the frustrating lack of a definitive explanation for Bodo’s suicide, it also helps to highlight and at the same time explain some of the ways in which the storyline in Bodo’s chapters is presented to the reader when the narrator focalizes through him.

An intriguing moment occurs in chapter ‘Regen en rampspoed’ (Deluge and disaster), that follows Bodo’s account of the week after the unexecuted suicide. After the suicide note has been sent around, he is given a week of sick leave that he mostly spends at home, avoiding contact with anyone apart from his wife. Bodo entertains a conviction that the current heavy rainstorms have to do with his suicide note:

He took it personally. He let his humor become influenced by the weather, as well as his thinking. With the letter came the rain and vice versa, his own view of the world turned out to have changed with the arrival of the rain: [...] the metaphors that he described himself with and the way the metaphors described him.<sup>329</sup>

Bodo frames the rainstorms as the beginning of “the Flood”<sup>330</sup> and sees them as a consequence of his catastrophic suicide note and a punishment for the pain and stress that he has caused to all his loved ones. The quotation draws attention to the metaphors by means of which the narrator describes Bodo’s experience via his focalization and the way in which the use of these metaphors changes something in his perception. He sees himself as responsible for the rain, he places his death wish, which can be viewed as the ultimate consequence of his depression, as a central occurrence in his history and the ultimate cause of everything that he experiences. In this way the text represents the effect that depression can have on a person’s apprehension of reality. The correlation between the weather and Bodo’s personal affective experience requires accounting for. Seen from this point of view, Bodo’s specific apprehension of the weather, interpreted through the metaphor of the flood as a punishment for his sins, can be understood

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<sup>328</sup> “beleefde, achttiende-eeuwse versie van zwaarmoedigheid, die elegante en opgewekte vorm van radeloosheid.” Februari, *Klont*, 105.

<sup>329</sup> “Hij trok het zich persoonlijk aan. Hij liet zijn humeur door het weer beïnvloeden, en zijn denken. Met de brief was de regen gekomen en andersom bleek met de komst van de regen zijn eigen blik op de wereld te zijn veranderd: [...] de metaforen waarmee hij zichzelf beschreef en de manier waarop de metaforen hem beschreven.” Februari, *Klont*, 80.

<sup>330</sup> “Een zondvloed.” Februari, *Klont*, 80.

as a representation of mental processes of a person with depression. It portrays how depression colours a person's outlook on the world and how it draws each occurrence into its gravitational forcefield and submits it to its influence. Bodo is not only accounting for his past sins but is also anticipating future disasters: "It did not only make him think about his own recent misstep, but it also conjured troubled images up – of a world that had become liquid and a history that came flooding in."<sup>331</sup>

The specificity of Bodo's point of view is made more conspicuous by the following passage with a focalization through Colette who "remained unbothered by this kind of tension",<sup>332</sup> and thinks about what damage the rainstorms have made in her garden and concludes: "The disaster seemed to be manageable after all."<sup>333</sup> Bodo's catastrophic outlook influenced by his depression contrasts sharply with the matter of fact, down-to-earth tone characterizing Colette. The interpretation of the flood as an image illustrating Bodo's mental health draws attention to how Bodo's vision is coloured by the depression. The depression disables Bodo from thinking straight and makes him succumb to all sorts of forebodings: "his body prepared for the waves and with it, his thought braced themselves as well. He [...] had a fearful foreboding."<sup>334</sup> A reparative reading of this passage provides an interpretation of the lack of information around Bodo's suicide note, that the reader cannot read in the text but that accounts for the state of Bodo's mental health as a factor contributing to his suicide ideation. In this case, reparative reading consists of meaning making in the face of lack of information or coloured perspective that is based on the empathetic assumption that there are reasons for both.

The incorporation of a previously confusing and unaccounted for part of the text into a satisfying interpretation for the interpreter, and an empathetic interpretation towards the character, mirrors the reparative impulse as described by Sedgwick. She draws on Klein's ideas of positions and likens reparative reading as a critical practice to the depressive position:

from which it is possible [...] to use one's own resources to assemble or repair the murderous part-objects into something like a whole. [...] Once assembled to one's own

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<sup>331</sup> "Het deed hem niet alleen aan zijn eigen recente misstap denken maar riep ook onrustige beelden op - van een wereld die vloeibaar werd en een geschiedenis die aan kwam golven." Februari, *Klont*, 80.

<sup>332</sup> "Had van al dit soort spanningen geen last." Februari, *Klont*, 80.

<sup>333</sup> "De catastrofe zag er al met al overzichtelijk uit." Februari, *Klont*, 81.

<sup>334</sup> "Zijn lichaam bereidde zich op de golven voor en met zijn lichaam zetten ook zijn gedachten zich schrap. Hij [...] kreeg een angstig voor gevoel." Februari, *Klont*, 80.



specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn.<sup>335</sup>

On this view, the novel *Klont*, with the unaccounted-for reasons for Bodo's suicide, can be seen as an incomplete part-object. This incompleteness invites the reparative reader to reassemble other parts of the object, chapter 'Regen and rampsloed', in a way that makes the relation with the object more satisfying. The nourishment and comfort gained by the reparation consists in the reader placing the affective scenario in relation to themselves and possibly also gaining self-knowledge and insight by it. As a reparative reader, I gain understanding and knowledge through reassembly of various parts of the text as part of the interpretive process. Thus, reparatively structured knowledge becomes available to me as a reader – I draw satisfaction from having gained this knowledge because it enables me to assume an empathetic and understanding attitude to the characters. This is not only an affective, emotional stance caused by compassion or pity, but also a result of engaging in an interpretive and reflective activity. Thus, accounting for the explanation of Bodo's suicide by foregrounding the theme of depression and interpreting these two passages in relation to each other repairs the object so that it becomes more satisfying and nourishing to both the reader and the character. This step makes it possible to identify with Bodo (as one part of the now reassembled object) because his mental processes and his vision of the world, which might otherwise strike the reader as implausible and unsubstantiated, are now accounted for as a representation of a mental disorder, namely depression.

Sedgwick's investigation of the paranoid and reparative position is framed as a description of a dominant epistemological practice and the sketch of the contours of an alternative one. The reliance on the expository power of paranoid critical practices' that Sedgwick points out, gives the knowledge produced by these practices a specific flavour. Reparative reading seen as "one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones"<sup>336</sup> produces a different kind of knowledge, one that is based on empathy and results in understanding of the personal circumstances and psychological processes of the other. This is a different kind of knowledge than insight into the functioning of the world and its systems that the paranoid critical practice produces. The knowledge gained by reparative reading offers less insight into the large-scale

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<sup>335</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

<sup>336</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 128.

social processes but does generate knowledge about the affective processes both in the reader and in characters. The reader does not remain at a distance from the object they are interacting with but becomes affectively engaged with it. The knowledge that the reader thus gains is partially oriented towards the self (reflection on one's worldview) but also outside of the self through reflection on relationships in the context of which the reader's affective experiences are taking place, evoked as they may be by the representations of affect in the novel.

### 3.3.2. Empathy and reparation required: family and fatherhood

The second instance where a confrontation with the novel's affective scenario invites reparative reading is focused around the issue of family. As a consequence of his announced suicide, Bodo witnesses an implosion of almost all his relationships and roles that he plays in society through his profession. In the wake of this implosion, the novel seems to propose the family life as a viable alternative framework that would provide Bodo with a possibility to construct a meaningful role for himself. There is a lot that could be said about the role of family from the paranoid position. Terence De Toy's dissertation about four contemporary British and American novels *It's All In the Family—Metamodernism and the Contemporary (Anglo-)—American Novel* is an example of reading an artistic representation of family within the context of a metamodernist attempt at historicization of the contemporary moment. De Toy's interest in the critique of the system and in historicization, motivates his reading of family, and is the paranoically structured backdrop against which my reparative reading of family in *Klont* is to be placed. De Toy sees family as “the highly localized and intimate social site upon which to negotiate the gap separating the estranged individual from the seemingly closed social totality.”<sup>337</sup> Like Ieven and Op de Beek, he also emphasizes the relationship between the cultural production framed by metamodernism as “symptomatic of a certain political state of affairs”,<sup>338</sup> thus casting his lot with the ideological criticism.

The reparative position on the other hand refrains from the attempts at historicization of artistic representation of the theme and fosters other kinds of knowledge production centred around empathy and self-reflection. My reparative reading has been kickstarted by a reflection on my own affective reaction to certain parts of the novel. Bodo's attitude towards the family life is one of disinterest, bordering on contempt. This reaction surprised and, in some places, even

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<sup>337</sup> De Toy, “It's All In the Family,” 7.

<sup>338</sup> De Toy, “It's All In the Family,” 10.

irritated me because of my values and upbringing. Becoming aware of this first reaction and of the influence that my predilections informing this reaction exercised on the interpretation, made me pause. Taking a pause to think about my preferences and judgements behind the first affective reaction made me reflect on both of them. It was however also the impulse that made me look more closely at the text and look for explanations focused on Bodo's personal circumstances and psychological make-up mentioned elsewhere in the novel. I looked for these, hoping that they would contribute to a reassembly of the object producing nourishment and comfort.

Bodo is confronted with the family life when the rainstorms result in a temporary cohabitation with the family of Colette's daughter from her first marriage, Nadine. In this sense, the fearful foreboding that Bodo has felt about the rain is confirmed and the disaster that he must now deal with is family life. The house of Nadine and her husband Nick has been made temporarily uninhabitable by the rainstorms: "When Bodo looks back on that episode, he also understands that his foreboding came to be true and that his new disaster has been caused by the deluge."<sup>339</sup> Bodo is shown to be harbouring deeply ambivalent feelings towards familial life. It is not clear whether that is caused by his dislike of Nadine and the inconvenience of having her family living with him (and Colette) temporarily, but he is seen expressing his disdain and impatience with the family life several times throughout the novel. Shortly after Nadine and Nick move in, Bodo wonders whether this familial togetherness is all there is to life: "You are sitting in your own house as an adult male [...] having the family as a warm blanket wrapped around you and you think: since when did this become the pinnacle of my life?"<sup>340</sup> Bodo might seem to have abandoned the high ideals of his youth mentioned in the introductory chapters by his subsequent career choices, but in this passage it becomes apparent that he has held on to some of the "high standards for his own actions in the world."<sup>341</sup> There is still enough ambition and idealism left in him that having the horizon of his life temporarily reduced to being surrounded by a family that is not his, only exacerbates his general feeling of failure and disappointment.

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<sup>339</sup> "Als Bodo later op de episode terugkijkt, snapt hij ook wel dat zijn voorgevoel is uitgekomen en dat zijn nieuwe rampspoed is veroorzaakt door de regen." Februari, *Klont*, 91.

<sup>340</sup> "Je zit als volwassen man in je eigen huis, [...] de familie als een warme deken om je heen en je denkt: sinds wanneer heet dit het hoogtepunt van mijn leven?" Februari, *Klont*, 92.

<sup>341</sup> "Hoge eisen aan zijn handelen in de wereld." Februari, *Klont*, 22.

Bodo gradually becomes more resentful of the family life as Nadine's due date comes close: "Not that he hated babies [...]. It was only the idea of pregnancy and the whole biological mess that made him shiver."<sup>342</sup> Bodo gives vent to this attitude at length in chapter 'Androïde' (Android) whose title derives from a passage focalized by him which I will discuss presently. We follow Bodo who expresses his aversion to childbearing by comparing the highly pregnant Nadine to a machine: "Now there was this machine lying in his bed, this apparatus, this kind of Victorian breeding machine that was only focused on childbearing. [...] A young woman with capacities [...] reduced to a frightening reproduction system that could barely keep itself standing upright."<sup>343</sup> The reflection on "the old-fashioned mechanism of the pregnancy"<sup>344</sup> is exactly as in the previous case placed in the context in which Bodo compares the achievement of a family life to the achievements gained through one's profession. The standard according to which he assesses both spheres of life is how much each contributes to the common weal of the society. Looking at Nadine, Bodo thinks the following:

The apparition in his bed was especially disappointing because it showed that man in these modern times [...] lost his belief in the higher, the immaterial [...]. Bodo – and he was himself not necessarily sure that he had an immaterial side – really had higher ambitions when he was Nadine's age [...].<sup>345</sup>

The way in which Bodo is used to place his life within a meaningful narrative through his professional contribution is contrasted with Nadine's implicit meaningful narrative (unexpressed by her but ascribed by Bodo), that gives significance to her life through motherhood. It is clear which construction of significance is preferred by Bodo at this moment.

From Bodo's reactions to family life and his contemptuous attitude towards childbearing we may conclude that he does not see anything valuable in this sphere of life. It is therefore rather surprising to realize that the novel also contains several reflections on the significance of

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<sup>342</sup> "Niet dat hij hekel had aan baby's [...]. Het was alleen de gedachte aan zwangerschap en de hele biologische knoeiboel die hem deed huiveren." Februari, *Klont*, 153.

<sup>343</sup> "Nu lag daar deze machine in zijn bed, dit apparaat, een soort victoriaanse broedmachine die alleen nog op baren was gericht. [...] Een jonge vrouw, met capaciteiten, [...] teruggebracht tot een angstwekkend reproductief systeem dat nauwelijks nog op zijn eigen benen kon staan." Februari, *Klont*, 206.

<sup>344</sup> "Het ouderwetse mechaniek van de zwangerschap." Februari, *Klont*, 208.

<sup>345</sup> "De vertoning in zijn bed was vooral ook zo teleurstellend omdat die aantoonde dat de mens in de moderne tijd [...] ook het geloof was kwijtgeraakt in het hogere, in het immateriële [...]. Bodo – en hij was er niet eens zeker van dat hij zelf een immateriële kant bezat – had toch echt grotere ambities gehad op de leeftijd van Nadine [...]." Februari, *Klont*, 207.

fatherhood focalized by Bodo. The first impulse for this reflection comes to Bodo during Alexei's lecture in London, where he thinks about mortality and wonders what will outlast him after his death. Bodo is found reflecting on these themes because from the stained-glass window in the hall he is sitting in, a depiction of Shakespeare is looking down at him. Bored by Alexei's lecture, Bodo thinks about the themes of Shakespeare's sonnets. Bodo reflects on his own mortality as follows: "He was sitting as a quintessence of dust in his chair along with his withering biological information."<sup>346</sup> This leads him to conclude that he has done nothing in his life that would bring him any type of permanence after his death. He observes that he has not secured the continuation of his name either through his descendants, or through his work (the two options suggested by Shakespeare's sonnets as routes towards immortality). This type of reflection is continued later in the novel as things come to a head because of Nadine's childbirth.

The birth of Colette's granddaughter is a trigger that deepens Bodo's reflection on his own childlessness that goes beyond the contemptuous attitude to other adults in his life with parental roles. The imminent birth leads to him experiencing the idea of fatherhood as painful: "of all men, the infertile are the most miserable."<sup>347</sup> He also recounts the consequences of the values that he has lived by in the past and the choices that he has made based on these values: "In his young days, he set his sights on his career and for the longest time, he held fast onto the illusion that one could be socially useful through the work that one did. The idea of procreation had not occurred to him until he was forty-five."<sup>348</sup> His whole life, Bodo has been constructing his identity and a sense of purpose in life around his profession and the potential, implicit impact of his line of work on the public sphere and society at large. After his planned suicide however, he has to reconsider his values. Now he can no longer view his work and the contribution he is making to the society in this way as meaningful.

It is rather poignant and ironic that the shift in values that we can sense behind this reflection takes place directly after a major professional achievement for Bodo; the public revelation of Alexei's plagiarism scandal. It is in this situation that the narrator observes: "As he becomes

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<sup>346</sup> "Met zijn verpieterde biologische informatie zat hij als de kwintessens van stof op zijn stoel." Februari, *Klont*, 130.

<sup>347</sup> "Van alle mannen zijn de onvruchtbaren het ongelukkigst." Februari, *Klont*, 254.

<sup>348</sup> "In zijn jonge jaren heeft hij zijn zinnen op een carrière gezet en lange tijd heeft hij vastgehouden aan de illusie dat je maatschappelijk van nut kunt zijn door te werken. De gedachte aan voortplanting is tot zijn vijfenveertigste niet in hem opgekomen." Februari, *Klont*, 254.

older, Bodo Klein becomes increasingly convinced that a man must be fertile.”<sup>349</sup> His values have shifted and now he considers having children as a possible way to construct meaning and make a contribution to the society: “Childlessness is an offence against society, thinks Bodo.”<sup>350</sup> The tragedy of this realization lies of course in the fact that Bodo is not a father and will probably never have children.

By connecting these two affective undercurrents in Bodo’s life – his contempt for the family life and his realization of the value of having children – and seeing them in relation to each other, we may now proceed to the scene that has triggered the need to account for these affective undercurrents by a reparation of my first uncomprehending and irritated reaction to it. The scene takes place in the last chapter and is marked by a tension between Bodo and Colette and by disappointment, frustration, dislike, reluctance and anger experienced by Bodo. His experience is in stark contrast to the homely, intimate, familial and festive atmosphere that pervades the evening on which visitors arrive at Bodo’s and Colette’s to celebrate the birth of Nadine’s baby girl. Bodo attempts to communicate his feelings to Colette, but she is unwilling to listen to him right now: “She’s definitely not willing to have her husband spoil her evening by his complicated cares, and she will not be denied this, this happiness.”<sup>351</sup> “In spite of all this happy domesticity”<sup>352</sup>, this only intensifies Bodo’s “tendency to stamp on the floor”<sup>353</sup> which peaks when he is expected to sit down to eat soup at the table with everyone. Led by a spirit of contrariness that has something childish to it, Bodo remains standing with his back to the rest of the company. His protest may at first reading seem motivated by a spiteful wish to ruin a nice evening for his wife, who has refused to listen to him. However, because we have traced the other two affective undercurrents, contempt for family and the belatedly realized value of childbearing for Bodo, we can now understand that this moment of contrariness is motivated by regret and sadness for having missed the opportunity to be a father himself. This is a reparation of the first reading by a reparative one that offers an insight into Bodo’s motivation and thus also the possibility to empathize.

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<sup>349</sup> “Met het ouder worden raakt Bodo Klein er in toenemende mate van overtuigd dat een man vruchtbaar moet zijn.” Februari, *Klont*, 254.

<sup>350</sup> “Kinderloosheid is een vergrijp tegen de gemeenschap, vindt Bodo.” Februari, *Klont*, 255.

<sup>351</sup> “Ze heeft beslist niet de behoefte haar avond te laten bederven door de gecompliceerde zorgen van haar echtgenoot, en ze laat zich dit niet ontnemen, dit geluk.” Februari, *Klont*, 268.

<sup>352</sup> “Ondanks al deze lieve huiselijkheid.” Februari, *Klont*, 268.

<sup>353</sup> “Neiging (om) op de vloer te stampen.” Februari, *Klont*, 268.

My decision to read reparatively has been motivated by the promise of being able to gain nourishment, comfort, as Sedgwick suggests, but also, as I found out, an empathetic attitude and self-knowledge. The potential positive effects or gains afforded by the paranoid position take place on a different level, as has been illustrated at the beginning of the chapter in my commentary on Demeyer and Vitse's use of reparation. From the paranoid position with its focus on the relation between the individual and the system and its critique of the system, reparation can only take place on the level of the relationship between the world and the text whereas from the reparative position, reparation happens between the reader and the text. In the selection of the passages that I focus on, I have been led by my own initial affective reaction to the text: I focused on the places where the text prompted doubt or a question in me or where I felt irritation or was baffled by the characters' behaviour. The reparative attitude has made me pause at such places and reflect on the assumptions governing my first reaction. This is a gesture of empathy and it presupposes a basic openness towards the character, a willingness to listen, to pay attention, to accept their feelings and thoughts and to postpone one's judgment as a reader. Subsequently, this pause creates space for making meaning of strange or irritating behaviours which results in increased empathy for the characters. The attempt at understanding and acceptance in these moments of incomprehension, has highlighted other passages in the novel that provided an explanation of the behaviour. This process of reading and interpretation has resulted in increased empathy, understanding for the characters and comprehension of the affective scenarios in the text.

The process of reparative reading that I have engaged in, overlaps partially with the effect of recognition that Felski describes in *Uses of Literature* as one of the four modes of textual engagement: "When we recognize something, we literally 'know it again'; we make sense of what is unfamiliar by fitting it into an existing scheme, linking it to what we already know."<sup>354</sup> Thus, recognition shares features with the reassembly of the object from the reparative position that "wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self."<sup>355</sup> The reparatively positioned reader has to have an attitude that will allow them to be open to the meaning and the eventual effect of the text. The contours of the reparative position bear a resemblance to the hermeneutic process as described by Hans Georg Gadamer: "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all

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<sup>354</sup> Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 25.

<sup>355</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.

its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings".<sup>356</sup> Part of the knowledge gained as part of the reparative reading is self-knowledge and self-reflection. By acknowledging one's biases one can gain understanding of what becomes foregrounded to them in the text. This also contributes to an understanding of how these biases influence interpretation. In this way the reparative reading adds to and complements the range of knowledge and insight gained using the concept of the affective dominant as a readerly attitude. In redirecting attention from the relationship between the text and the world to that between the text and the reader, the range of knowledge that the reparative practice has to offer can be expanded. Drawing on Felski's idea of recognition as one of the "modes of textual engagement"<sup>357</sup> denoting "multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts,"<sup>358</sup> it is possible to include self-knowledge as one of the effects that such an engagement between text and reader can produce: "recognition in reading revolves around a moment of personal illumination and heightened self-understanding."<sup>359</sup>

*Klont* is a novel whose structure and narrative situation sustains oscillation between two different readerly attitudes or positions. The examination of the dominant as a readerly attitude through oscillation between two readerly positions separately from the foregrounding of a dominant question by the text contributes to the understanding of how certain questions become marked as dominant. After having explored the various facets of the novel that invite paranoid and reparative reading and having described the types of knowledge that both positions produce, I want to zoom in on the textual element that places the reader at a crossroads, inspiring either a paranoid reading or a reparative one, thus dramatizing the oscillation between the positions. As has been illustrated in the previous chapter, oscillation never stops, the movement that symbolizes the ambiguity of the texts and the many interpretations that are thinkable, could go on forever. The focus on readerly attitude that has characterized this chapter however contributes to the description of the two interpretive options that the ending of the novel offers. By reflecting on and describing their position, the reader can in the end make a more informed choice for one of them and let the final interpretation be influenced by it.

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<sup>356</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999), 271-272.

<sup>357</sup> Felski *Uses of Literature*, 14.

<sup>358</sup> Felski *Uses of Literature*, 14.

<sup>359</sup> Felski *Uses of Literature*, 30.



### 3.4 Conclusion

*Klont* urges the reader to oscillate between different attitudes by creating a frame within which the stories of Bodo and Alexei are presented. The assumption of the paranoid position fed by Alexei's manipulation becomes confirmed in his last chapter by a play with genres and fictional worlds (cf. 3.1.1). The novel plays a game with metafiction because it presents many thinkable versions of a book called *Klont*, each written in another genre. There is the non-fiction presentation of Alexei's research that he promises to Schneider, there is the autobiographical novel that Schneider suggests Alexei write after being exposed as a plagiarizer and finally, there is the novel by Maxim Februari. The first book called *Klont*, a non-fiction, is introduced at the beginning of the novel. However, after having been exposed as a fraud at the end of the novel, it is no longer possible for Alexei to write this non-fiction book on klont, a popularizing publication on his research. Thus, the second possible book called *Klont* appears on the scene. In the last chapter, Alexei mentions that he is planning to write "an autobiographical story in which I would explain to the readers in detail what went wrong. [...] How it came about that for the longest time, I was able to trick others who have been sincerely and trustingly cooperating with me."<sup>360</sup> The similarity between this description of the autobiographical story that Alexei is planning to write and his chapters in Februari's novel *Klont* makes it possible to consider the untrustworthy, morally corrupt, failed public intellectual Alexei Krups as the only voice narrating the novel. The world of Bodo Klein would thus be a figment of Alexei's imagination, illustrating the mechanism of his fall. On this view, the chapters about Bodo would be seen as narrated by Alexei, who hides behind the authorial persona.

Through this play with narrative and fictional levels, the boundaries between fictional and real worlds are being blurred and breached. Clearly, enabled by the double narrative perspective, the text is making space here for the foregrounding of ontological questions. Looking at this aspect of Februari's novel through the principle of foregrounding by means of textual signals, we would find out that it is having "the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological 'horizon' of the fiction, multiplying its worlds."<sup>361</sup> If we consider Alexei as the ultimate narrator of both worlds projected by *Klont*, the world of Bodo is a hypodiegetic world, "one level down"<sup>362</sup> from the world in which Alexei narrates the cautionary tale of his rise and fall. This

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<sup>360</sup> "Een autobiografisch verhaal waarin ik tot in de details aan de lezers uitlegde wat er was misgelopen. [...] Hoe het toch kwam dat ik anderen, die oprecht en in goed geloof met me hadden samengewerkt, zo lang om de tuin had kunnen leiden." Februari, *Klont*, 263.

<sup>361</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 112.

<sup>362</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 113.

digging into the layers of narrative levels and stacked fictional worlds can be seen as a manifestation of the paranoid position in literary critique. Felski talks about critique as being characterized by the metaphor of plunging the depths of the literary text in order to unearth meanings that are not immediately apparent:

In the style of reading I call “digging down” we see spatial metaphors of surface and depth being yoked to a critique of culture. Digging is necessary because a text is composed of strata and its meanings are hidden from sight. Matters of import are shrouded, obscured, and inaccessible to the casual observer; they can only be mined via an exacting technique of close reading.<sup>363</sup>

Upon realizing what games the narrator is playing with the ontology of fictional worlds, the paranoid-minded reader might guard themselves with suspicion against possible tricks and conclude that finally, Bodo, Nas and Kirstin Elias, among others, are a product of Alexei’s imagination rather than a product of Februari’s imagination, or perhaps rather the imagination of the extradiegetic narrator. The question of who the ultimate narrator of *Klont* is would be answered with Alexei by the paranoidly positioned reader.

Once the paranoid position is assumed, parts of the text that support this move become foregrounded. Not only to me, but also to a significant number of the reviewers of *Klont* – Vervaeck, Bekkering, De Reus and Schouten – all pay attention to an excerpt from Alexei’s lecture on the novel where he quotes Walter Benjamin. They seem to consider this one of the most important, core passages of the novel; Vervaeck speaks of “the core of the novel”,<sup>364</sup> Bekkering about its “message”,<sup>365</sup> and Schouten about the novel’s “deepest meaning”.<sup>366</sup> Apparently, the passage where Februari quotes Benjamin becomes foregrounded to these four reviewers too. Mostly, this seems to be caused by the influence of the framework within which Vaessens has placed Februari’s work, namely as a reflection on literature’s capacity to play a role in the public debate on a current and relevant topic. Departing from my consideration of the influence of readerly positions on foregrounding, the passage requires accounting for from

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<sup>363</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique* 56.

<sup>364</sup> “De kern van de roman.” Vervaeck, “Een nieuwe Bint”.

<sup>365</sup> “Boodschap.” Persis Bekkering, “Briljante roman van Maxim Februari over hoe mens te zijn in een 'gedataficeerde' wereld“ (Brilliant Novel By Maxim Februari About How To Be Human In a Dataficated World), *de Volkskrant*, published 14-10-2017, accessed 29 August 2022 <https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/niet-eerder-verpakte-maxim-februari-zijn-boodschap-zo-geestig-als-in-klont~b3a6d02b/>.

<sup>366</sup> “Diepste betekenis.” Rob Schouten, „Wint de roman van de robot?“ *Trouw*, published 7 October 2017, accessed 29 August 2022, <https://scholen-literom-nbdbiblion-nl.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/detail/563378/wint-de-roman-van-de-robot/>.

the paranoid position. In that case, it begs to be read as a metacommentary on the situation in which Bodo finds himself, or as a text that has inspired Alexei in his creation of the fictional character Bodo Klein:

The origin of the novel is the lonely individual, writes Walter Benjamin in 1930 in his essay about the crisis of the novel. ‘Die Geburtskammer des Romans ist das Individuum in seiner Einsamkeit.’ The point of departure is the loner who is no longer able to express their deepest wishes exemplarily. Who is different. Who can’t serve as an example. Who does not know what to do and cannot counsel anyone.<sup>367</sup>

Bodo is exactly such an individual, he cannot serve as an example, has difficulty expressing his deepest desires and does not know how to go on with his life. The interpretation of this passage as expressing Alexei’s aesthetic programme and at the same time a description of an inspiration for the protagonist of his autobiographical novel (Bodo) complicates the relationship between the text and the world in a way that is characteristic for a focus on epistemology and ontology. The illumination and description of the multi-layered and complicated relationship between the text and the world can be seen as a type of knowledge produced by the paranoid position. The prize that the paranoid reader has to be prepared to pay for that insight is that Bodo becomes a paper character. By being placed within the framework of this narrative construction visible from the paranoid position, his struggles with depression and with constructions of significance do not strike the reader with such urgency or become much less worthy of their attention in the process of interpretation.

The knowledge that the paranoid position produces bears witness to its rational and critical focus. Its product is further doubt about the representation of Bodo’s world and questions about the purpose behind such representation. It leads to further inquiry in this vein: does Alexei portray Bodo in a specific light so that this representation would serve a strategic purpose of his? What interest does his rendition of the events leading to his downfall serve? What advantage is he trying to gain by this representation? The knowledge that such a questioning would produce is the unmasking of Alexei’s half-truths and strategies aimed at winning sympathy and presenting himself in the best possible light despite the evidence of his

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<sup>367</sup> “De oorsprong van de roman is het eenzame individu, schreef Walter Benjamin in het jaar 1930 in zijn essay over de crisis van de roman. ‘Die Geburtskammer des Romans ist das Individuum in seiner Einsamkeit.’ Vertrekpunt voor het schrijven is de eenling, die zich niet langer exemplarisch kan uitdrukken over zijn diepste wensen. Die anders is. Die geen voorbeeld is. Die zich geen raad weet en geen raad kan geven.” Februari, *Klont*, 76.

unreliability. Lurking everywhere behind these strategies of Alexei Krups, to no one's surprise and benefit, a bid for power can be discovered, whether in the form of wealth or less directly, power in the form of having a platform, having the chance for one's ideas to influence one's audience. The novel *Klont*, when written by Alexei, would be autobiographical, and could thus be read as an attempt to control the damage to his reputation and to curry favour with the audience by drawing on the power of his charisma and personal attractiveness. This perspective however bypasses the question of how the reader relates to the text. If Bodo's struggles are viewed in the light of how Alexei's autobiographical novel has been constructed, their poignancy, humanness and potential to move is diminished.

Still, there is another passage containing the potential poetics for *Klont*. In this case the poetics however seems to relate to Februari's novel *Klont* rather than Alexei's:

The novel, says Trilling, is coming to an end because of our state of mind. We have closed our minds off for the novel's field of activity – for an exchange of thought about morals. We have lost our fascination for the mores. [...] 'That is we can think about it only without joy.' We are only ready to talk about morality if we do not experience any joy doing it.<sup>368</sup>

It seems that Februari has attempted to invalidate Trilling's grim foretelling about the end of the novel caused by a dwindled interest for morality by writing *Klont*. The novel describes situations that demand a moral assessment from the reader and by making a plagiarizing scandal one of its main plot points, it thematizes the moral aspects of life explicitly. At the same time, the light and playful tone that accompanies the moral theme, makes it easily digestible and opens up the possibility of experiencing joy while reading about morality, in contrast to what Trilling says about the novel. This second passage with poetics supports the reading of the novel as narrated by the extradiegetic narrator as the ultimate instance for the novel. If this reading becomes foregrounded, the option - supported by the first passage containing the poetics of the novel - to read Alexei as the ultimate narrative instance becomes disqualified. From the reparative position, the reader would be inclined to consider the extradiegetic narrator as the

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<sup>368</sup> "De roman, zegt Trilling, komt aan zijn eind door onze geestesgesteldheid. We hebben onze geest afgesloten voor het werktein van de roman – voor de gedachteswisseling over moraal. We zijn onze fascinatie voor zeden kwijt. [...] 'That is, we can think about it only without joy.' We zijn alleen bereid over moraal te praten als we er geen enkele lol aan beleven." Februari, *Klont*, 126.

ultimate one because this gives them the option to relate to Bodo's struggles as real and requiring empathy that is both the prerequisite and the result of the reparative reading.

My demonstration of how foregrounding of certain textual passages works, based on a changed readerly attitude, does not conclusively resolve the question of the ultimate narrator. In this way, the reader can oscillate between interpretations forever, as Van den Akker and Vermeulen's suggestion of the unending nature of oscillation suggests.<sup>369</sup> This is caused by the fact that the question of narrators' reliability is one of trust. Trust is a relational question, not a cognitive, rational question. The question of trust cannot be resolved by looking for answers on the level of representation or relation text-world, nor by looking for answers within the text, its narrative and metafictional constructions. The dilemma into which *Klont*'s last chapters have manoeuvred us cannot be determined by looking closely at the foregrounding in the text – it can only be resolved by making a reference to the relationship between the text and the reader and taking the readerly attitude into account.

Demeyer and Vitse encounter a similar conundrum in their analysis of David Foster Wallace's short story "Octet". Their commentary on the short story illustrates the difficulty of approaching by means of a foregrounding on a textual level and from a paranoid position towards a text that is attempting to affectively relate to its audience: "“This thing I feel, I can't name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?”"<sup>370</sup> In their analysis of the short story, Demeyer and Vitse focus on illustrating the "shift from an epistemological and ontological to the affective dominant."<sup>371</sup> These three types of issues become limited to two options, affect and cognition further on in Demeyer and Vitse's analysis. According to them, the narrator of the story "seeks his refuge in affective means by means of which a cognitive question about truth and sincerity can be answered."<sup>372</sup>

By considering affect as the means to answering cognitive questions, which is a principle visible behind many analyses in their study, Demeyer and Vitse miss what is at stake in "Octet". What the narrator of "Octet" resorts to in his attempt to communicate is not an issue of a cognitive resolution of problems in reality. He breaks through the metafictional reflections on postmodern

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<sup>369</sup> See Van den Akker and Vermeulen "Notes on Metamodernism," 61, 67.

<sup>370</sup> David Foster Wallace, "Octet", *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*, (New York, Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 154. Quoted in Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 29.

<sup>371</sup> "Verschuiving van een epistemologische en ontologische naar een affectieve dominant." Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 29.

<sup>372</sup> "Zoekt zijn toevlucht in affectieve middelen om de cognitieve vraag naar waarheid en oprechtheid te beantwoorden." Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 30.

conventions that make up the short story and attempts to relate to the reader directly by communicating an affect. Demeyer and Vitse are staying within the bounds of the paranoid regime of knowledge production where affect contributes to “an epistemological framing of the contemporary situation”,<sup>373</sup> which is why they miss the relational stakes of Wallace’s short story. These can better be understood from the reparative position which enables the reader to notice the affect that inspires the question and to relate to it by means of the affect that the desperate and yet hopeful question evokes in them.

By not entering the level of readerly attitude, Demeyer and Vitse do not paint a precise enough picture of the type of oscillation that is occurring in both *Klont* and Wallace’s “Octet”. The novel oscillates between mistrust and trust, paranoia and reparation, suspicion and meaning construction. These are relational stances to an object rather than questions of a shift from cognition to affect that would govern the overall literary production of a certain period, as *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* claims in accordance with its structuralist conception of a text-based dominant. The wager of *Klont* is that the affective connection between the text and the reader (created by a poignant and moving portrayal of character’s affective experiences) can function as a hook that will make the reader relate to the text not only by means of critique but also through affect and reparation.

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<sup>373</sup> “Een epistemologische kadering van de huidige situatie.” Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis*, 288.

## 4. Chapter 4 Oscillating interpretations: *Wij zijn licht* and the relational frame

### *The Patience of Ordinary Things*

*It is a kind of love, is it not?  
How the cup holds the tea,  
How the chair stands sturdy and foursquare,  
How the floor receives the bottoms of shoes,  
Or toes. How the soles of feet know  
Where they're supposed to be. [...]*<sup>374</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

The first chapter of this dissertation has considered how textual signals and the questions that they foreground influence interpretation. The second chapter has focused on the role of readerly attitude in the interpretation in order to point out a factor that influences the process and results of interpretation. These factors have until now been handled separately. The final novel from my corpus, Gerda Blees' debut novel *Wij zijn licht* (We are light), published in 2020, lends itself to the demonstration of oscillation between interpretations. In this chapter, I will consider factors influencing interpretation - textual signals and readerly attitude - that have previously been considered separately. Before publishing the novel that has ended up on the shortlist of Librisliteratuurprijs and won the European Union Prize for Literature and Boekhandelsprijs, Blees has written a collection of short stories *Aan doodgaan dachten wij niet* (We Did Not Think About Dying) in 2017 and a book of poetry *Dwaallichten* (Will-o'-the-Wisps) in 2018.

The storyline of *Wij zijn licht* is in some senses rather non-spectacular. Blees has based the plot on “(a) report from June 2017 [...] about the conspicuous death of an female commune member from Utrecht who ‘adopted extraordinary habits with regards to diet’ as the Public Prosecution Service reported [...]”<sup>375</sup>, as Thomas de Veen mentions in *NRC*. This is the sort of news “that

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<sup>374</sup> Pat Schneider, *Another River: New and Selected Poems* (Amherst Writers and Artists Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>375</sup> “Een krantenbericht uit juni 2017 [...] over de opvallende dood van een Utrechtse bewoonster van een woongroep die 'uitzonderlijke gewoontes hanteerde met betrekking tot voeding', zoals het Openbaar Ministerie het beschreef [...]” Thomas de Veen, „Je kan iemand niet dwingen anders te gaan denken“, *NRC*, published 26 March 2021, accessed 23 September 2022.

you read aloud at breakfast while snickering”<sup>376</sup>, writes Bo van Houwelingen in a review of the novel in *de Volkskrant*. Almost all the reviews of the novel published in dailies<sup>377</sup> mention the fact that the original source that Blees’ “boundless imagination”<sup>378</sup> has taken flight with are dry and somewhat tragic facts from real life.<sup>379</sup> From these humble ingredients, Blees created a gripping story with psychological depth by spicing it up with an innovative form. These are the two aspects of the novel (depth of characterization and psychological motivation and innovative form) that many of the reviewers noticed. In twenty-five chapters, narrated and focalized by a different narrator-focalizer in each, Blees does not only describe the unconventional lifestyle of a four-person commune but offers an insight into their relationships, group dynamics, individual psychology and emotional life, too. Van Houwelingen evaluates *Wij zijn licht* as “multilayered fiction”<sup>380</sup> written with a “mild outlook”.<sup>381</sup> Vandenberghe and Katja de Bruin agree with this evaluation and add their own descriptors that describe the same aspect of the author’s attitude: “full of empathy”<sup>382</sup> and “compassion”.<sup>383</sup> The reviewers ascribe these characteristics to the author but, as I will argue, empathy and compassion can be understood both as an effect of the text and its form as well as an effect of an assumed readerly attitude.

In *Wij zijn licht*, the narration and focalization is taken up not only by characters (the parents, the siblings, the neighbours, the advocate), but also by objects of daily use (a pen, a slow juicer, bread, socks, but also a house), abstractions (cognitive dissonance, resistance, dementia and doubt) and phenomena (smell of oranges, internet, night, light). Human characters focalize and narrate only insofar as they represent a certain function or stand in for an important relation.

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<sup>376</sup> “Dat je gniffelend voorleest tijdens het ontbijt.” Bo van Houwelingen, “Eén curieus feit, 25 goede vertellers”, *de Volkskrant*, published 30 May 2020, accessed 23 September 2022.

<sup>377</sup> This is mostly the genre of sources that are available as secondary literature about *Wij zijn licht* specifically. As the novel has been published fairly recently, there has been little amount of scholarly attention paid to it. I am using the reviews being aware of the fact that the goal and target audience of this genre of text is different than of a scholarly text that I am writing.

<sup>378</sup> “Tomeloze verbeelding.” Dirk Vandenberghe, “Cirkelen boven goed en kwaad. ‘Wij zijn licht’, het romandebuut van Gerda Blees”, *De lage landen*, 28 October 2020, accessed 23 September 2022, <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/cirkelen-boven-goed-en-kwaad-wij-zijn-licht-het-romandebuut-van-gerda-blees>.

<sup>379</sup> The fact that almost all the reviews (8 out of 11 that I have read) mention the original source of Blees’ inspiration can be explained, apart from the fact that the first review often sets the tone for the rest, by the human interest in the person of the author that characterizes the Dutch reception of literature. In the reception of *Wij zijn licht* this trend is supported by the fact that out of the 11 reviews, 2 are partially based on and contain an interview with the author.

<sup>380</sup> “Gelaagde fictie.” Van Houwelingen, “Eén curieus feit”.

<sup>381</sup> “Milde blik.” *Liter*, published 24 March 2022, accessed 24 September 2022, <https://leesliter.nl/2022/03/24/gerda-blees-wordt-gastschrijver-voor-liter/>.

<sup>382</sup> “Vol empathie.” Dirk Vandenberghe, “Cirkelen boven goed en kwaad”.

<sup>383</sup> “Mededogen.” Katja de Bruin, “Leven van licht”, *VPRO gids*, 32, accessed 24 September 2022, <https://www.vprogids.nl/2020/22/inhoud/artikelen/p32-Leven-van-licht.html>.



These instances through whose voice and perception we follow the story will be referred to as narrator-focalizers. I will call this form of narration and focalization – specific for and characteristic of the novel – *kaleidoscopic perception*. Each chapter’s narration bears different characteristics determined both by the voice and perception of the narrating and focalizing instance. The reviewers’ opinions vary on the issue of the extent to which this device works and contributes to the success of the novel. Koen Eykhout is mildly positive about the twenty-five narrators: “She says what she needs to say in a language that fits the context but does not try to create literature for the sake of it.”<sup>384</sup> Katja de Bruin’s praise on the formal choice characterizing the novel is more decisive: “It sounds like a contrived literary trick, but it turns out to work miraculously well.”<sup>385</sup> Anne van den Dool, writing about “commune literature”<sup>386</sup> in *De lage landen*, is not as enthusiastic about the device: “*Wij zijn licht* thus seems to be rather an interesting experiment with the storyline than a successful narration: because the baton always gets taken over by another character, this deprives the novel of depth and speed.”<sup>387</sup> Both Dirk Vandenberghe and Jörgen Apperloo (in a Youtube video on a channel called Vlogboek) mention a metafictional element that appears when the role of the narrator-focalizer is taken up by the storyline of the novel. Apperloo even characterizes the metalevel from which the storyline narrates as “playful”<sup>388</sup> and “postmodern”<sup>389</sup> which is how I am also going to read it.

The story that is being narrated and focalized by the different entities is rather straightforward: Elisabeth, a woman approximately in her sixties, living in a small commune with her sister Melodie and housemates Muriël and Petrus, dies at night in the presence of these three people. The summoned doctor observes signs of malnutrition in the deceased and sends for the medical examiner who alarms the police. The three housemates are arrested, driven to the police station where they are being investigated for several days. It turns out that the commune members are

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<sup>384</sup> “Ze zegt wat ze te zeggen heeft in een taal die past bij de context, maar gaat niet zitten literaturen.” Koen Eykhout, “Leven van de lucht”, *Dagblad De Limburger*, published 14 June 2020, accessed 24 September 2022.

<sup>385</sup> “Dat klinkt als een gekunsteld literair trucje, maar het pakt wonderbaarlijk goed uit.” Katja de Bruin, “Leven van licht”.

<sup>386</sup> “Communeliteratuur.” Anne van den Dool, “Wanneer de klad in de commune komt: idealen versus realiteit in romans van Gerda Blees, Merijn de Boer en Eva Meijer”, *De lage landen* (Rekkem): 64 No 4, (November 2021), 32.

<sup>387</sup> “Daarmee lijkt *Wij zijn licht* eerder een interessant verhaalexperiment dan een geslaagde vertelling: doordat het estafettestukje telkens door een ander personage wordt overgepakt, ontstaat minder ruimte voor vaart en diepgang.” Anne van den Dool, “Wanneer de klad in de commune komt”, 32.

<sup>388</sup> “Ludiek.” Jörgen Apperloo, “Wantrouw wij”, *Vlogboek*, published 23 December 2020, Video, 5:17 accessed 14 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAnqq6Kz5fg>.

<sup>389</sup> “Postmodern.” Apperloo, “Wantrouw wij”, 5:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAnqq6Kz5fg>.

in a process of freeing themselves from dependence on food and believe that they can survive on light energy. In the course of several days of their detention, they meet with their advocates and are questioned by two investigators, Liesbeth and Asif. After that, they are released because their actions (letting their housemate die of the consequences of malnutrition before their eyes) cannot be categorized as a criminal offence and the investigators cannot prove that the deceased was prevented from being able to eat. The three remaining housemates return to the house that they share, processing their time in custody and the confrontation that it has been with others' perspectives on their lifestyle. As a result, Muriël begins to doubt whether it is a good idea to continue living in the commune and is trying to leave at night but does not come further than the hallway because the front door of the house is locked.

#### 4.1.1 Narratological analysis of kaleidoscopic perception

I am first going to look at the formal device of kaleidoscopic perception, mentioned in all the reviews, through the lens of narratology, to describe the formal choice and its 'technical' possibilities. It is namely through the kaleidoscopic perception that the relatively straightforward story of a tragic but otherwise unremarkable incident, reveals the depths of human motivation, emotion and trauma. The narrator-focalizers offer their perspective on the motives, emotional lives and the past of each of the four commune members. To a much lesser extent, this information is also given about Liesbeth and Asif and the parents and closest relatives of Elisabeth and Melodie. One of the narrator-focalizers, daily bread, makes it clear that the perception and perspective by means of which the reader follows the narration in chapter 3 is theirs. Daily bread explains that it is "in the institutes that keep the world free of weakness, sickness and aggression: the home for the elderly, the hospital, the prison"<sup>390</sup> that it is mainly to be found. It regrets the fact that these days, regular consumption of bread is being frowned upon for health reasons: "Apparently, we contain too much gluten and the wrong kind of carbohydrates, whatever those are."<sup>391</sup> The attention and perception of daily bread however soon moves from these general observations on its relation with people in general to its relation with a specific person, in this case Muriël. The bread tells us that Muriël has not been eating them for several years and bears witness to her temptation to disrupt her light diet and alleviate her physical discomfort caused by hunger. The insight of such narrator-focalizers as daily bread, who are objects of daily use, is characterized by making comments on such aspects of the

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<sup>390</sup> "In de instituten die de wereld vrij van zwakte, ziekte en agressie houden: het verpleeghuis, het ziekenhuis, de gevangenis." Gerda Blees, *Wij zijn licht* (Amsterdam: Podium, 2020), 24.

<sup>391</sup> "We zouden te veel gluten bevatten, en verkeerde koolhydraten, wat dat ook mogen zijn." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 25.

character's inner life or behaviour as can be seen as connected to the sphere of the narrator-focalizer: "We think it's fine if we get thickly topped with something sweet from time to time, this makes the human life all the more pleasant. And Muriël was [...] a type with fast metabolism, a type that got anemia if she didn't eat enough."<sup>392</sup>

Other general observations on the effects of the kaleidoscopic perception are that the perspective of the narrator-focalizers is mostly limited temporally and spatially to when they are in close proximity to the characters (physically or mentally, as is the case where the narrator-focalizers are abstractions). The part of the story that each narrator-focalizer can relate is thus rather limited. The spatial-temporal limitedness of the kaleidoscopic perception is compensated by the depth of insight that it offers. The narrator-focalizers make conjectures about the characters' psychology and their motivations or about the physical relations and interactions with the characters. The specificity and limitedness of narration and focalization which has its own specific flavour in each chapter also has comical consequences sometimes, for example in the case of the preliminary findings written out and printed on a couple of A4s: "Printed in three copies and stapled together, we lie on a grey table desk under a system ceiling with many small holes in it while Liesbeth, Asif and Ton deliberate over us."<sup>393</sup> The perception of the focalizer is represented so consequently and literally that we are limited to the point of view of the papers with preliminary conclusions and thus are seeing only the ceiling and perhaps sometimes also the nostrils of the investigators bowing over them. The narrator-focalizer who is an object (such as daily bread) and mostly observes characters externally – their actions, behaviours and words – is however regularly interchanged with those that can observe the mental and emotional processes because they are part of human consciousness (such as resistance, cognitive dissonance or doubt).

Each of the narrator-focalizers speaks in a different voice and perceives from a different "centre of perception".<sup>394</sup> As opposed to pre-structuralist narratology,<sup>395</sup> structuralist narratology offers

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<sup>392</sup> "Wij mogen best lekker vet en zoet worden belegd zo nu en dan, dat maakt een mensenleven alleen maar aangenamer. En Muriël was [...] het type snelle verbrander, het type dat bloedarmoede kreeg als ze niet genoeg at." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 28.

<sup>393</sup> "In drievoud geprint en geniet liggen we op een grijs tafelblad onder een systeemplafond met heel veel kleine gaatjes erin, terwijl Liesbeth, Asif en Ton over ons vergaderen." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 177.

<sup>394</sup> "Centrum van waarneming." Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Vertelduivels* (Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Vantilt and VUBPress, 2001), 77.

<sup>395</sup> Here I am drawing on the categorisation of narratological theories of Herman and Vervaeck in *Vertelduivels* where they divide between the book into three chapters roughly corresponding to the development in this field of literary criticism: „Voor en rond het structuralisme“ (Before and after structuralism), „Het structuralisme“ (The structuralism) and „De postklassieke narratologie“ (The post-classical narratology).

a crucial insight into the nature of focalization which I have drawn on by referring to focalization as a centre of perception. By using these words, Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck draw on an insight of Mieke Bal, who defines focalization as perception, which “is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body.”<sup>396</sup> Herman and Vervaeck usefully specify perception as not concerning only vision but “all senses”<sup>397</sup> and “mental aspects, [...] the cognitive, emotional and ideological aspects of perception”.<sup>398</sup> By explicitly referring to all these aspects as relevant for focalization, they are specifying all that is contained in Bal’s reference to the psychosomatic nature of perception that “depends on so many factors”.<sup>399</sup> These insights are useful for the description of the specific form of narration and focalization (by objects of daily use, abstracta and relational functions represented by human characters) in this novel. Structuralist narratology draws attention to the psychological and emotional aspects of focalization that characterize the way that the narrator-focalizers relate to the characters. Bal’s definition of focalization therefore helps us to pay attention exactly to such an aspect of focalization that is most characteristic for the narrating and focalizing instances. However, structuralist narratology cannot help us interpret the positive affective charge and relationality of the narrator-focalizers, the flavour or value of the way they narrate and focalize. The affects of narrator-focalizers would probably be read as functions of the psychological and emotional characterization of the characters themselves and the phenomenological and relational aspects of their narration and perception would be overlooked.

In order to appreciate the specificity of the formal device of the kaleidoscopic perception, one of its characteristics must be pointed out. Each chapter begins with the introduction of the narrator-focalizer by means of the same formula: “We are the night.”<sup>400</sup> “We are the facts.”<sup>401</sup> “We are the Hellinkjes.”<sup>402</sup> The narrator-focalizers refer to themselves in first person plural<sup>403</sup> and usually characterize themselves shortly at the beginning of the chapter. Sometimes the plural of first-person narration clashes with the individuality of the self that is relating a

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<sup>396</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 145.

<sup>397</sup> “Alle zintuigen.” Herman and Vervaeck, *Vertelduivels*, 77.

<sup>398</sup> “Psychische aspecten, [...] de cognitieve, emotionele en de ideologische aspecten van waarneming.” Herman and Vervaeck, *Vertelduivels*, 83.

<sup>399</sup> Bal, *Narratology*, 145.

<sup>400</sup> “Wij zijn de nacht.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 5.

<sup>401</sup> “Wij zijn de feiten.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 49.

<sup>402</sup> “Wij zijn de Hellinkjes.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 117. De Hellinkjes is the name of the conversation in Whatsapp that Melodie’s and Elisabeth’s three siblings have.

<sup>403</sup> In spite of this fact, I am going to refer to the narrator-focalizers in 3rd person singular to make my text easier to follow and less clunky.

particular chapter. Such a clash occurs for example in chapter 5 where “the advocate”<sup>404</sup> is the narrator-focalizer. This is a chapter reporting on Melodie’s first interview with her legal councillor who has been charged with defending her. A dialogue between two human characters is taking up most of the chapter, there are two people in the room, and the councillor still refers to themselves in plural.

There comes a crucial moment of breakthrough, in the way that these two women relate to each other, when Melodie’s circumstances affectively touch and influence the councillor:

Suddenly, we become overwhelmed by a strong unstoppable feeling of compassion with this woman, who is like a young wrinkly bird [...] that twitters for its mother, and her mother is not here but we are present and without thinking about whether it is appropriate in this professional setting, we lay our hand on the client’s head and start to stroke. ‘It’s okay, Melodie, calm down. [...] I am going to help you, that’s what I’m here for.’<sup>405</sup>

The form of narration in the plural of first-person clashes with the personally and affectively motivated decision of the councillor to abandon the professional constraints placed on the relationship between a councillor and a client. It also clashes with the first-person singular used in direct speech that emphasizes the individuality and singularity of the councillor’s decision to really see Melodie as a person.

Another instance where the form clashes with the content is in chapter 13 where Elisabeth’s corpse relates the autopsy done on it by a forensic pathologist. The appearance of a focalizing and narrating corpse that is being investigated and treated as an object that can provide information that living subjects would not willingly divulge, can make the reader question the axiomatic relation between and identification of the body with an individual person. What seems to be a matter of course in the daily life of most people, namely, seeing human bodies as persons is subtly interrogated here through the clash between the form of the novel and its content. There are however also chapters where the plural of the first-person narration clashes less, such as a chapter related by “Sound and Love”,<sup>406</sup> a sign hanging by the door of Melodie’s

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<sup>404</sup> “De raadvrouw.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 41.

<sup>405</sup> “Plotseling worden wij overmand door een groot onstuitbaar gevoel van mededogen met deze vrouw, die als een jong gerimpeld vogeltje [...] om haar moeder kwettert, en haar moeder is er niet, maar wij zijn er wel, en zonder erover na te denken of het passend is in deze professionele context, leggen we onze hand op het hoofd van cliënte en beginnen we te aaien. ‘Rustig maar, Melodie, rustig maar. [...] Ik ga je helpen, daar ben ik voor.’” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 47.

<sup>406</sup> “Klank en Liefde.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 68.

house or by “the parents”<sup>407</sup> of Elisabeth and Melodie. The we-form seems to be also rather logical in the chapter narrated and focalized by two cigarettes that are being smoked simultaneously by Petrus and Liesbeth. The cigarettes make an observation that helps to explain what the use of this unusual narrative form can mean: “We are two cigarettes. We don’t know each other, we have not even been made in the same factory but we are still connected, as all cigarettes in the world are.”<sup>408</sup> The we-form suggests that the narrator-focalizers are not speaking or perceiving as individual cigarettes, slices of bread, pens, dementia or the world wide web, but for a collective, for all cigarettes, pens and daily bread in the world. There is a certain claim to universality in their relations to people that is expressed by the plural of first-person. It is as if they were saying that they would relate in this way to all people, not only to these particular commune members or investigators. The way in which dementia relates and distorts the thoughts of Hansje, Melodie’s and Elisabeth’s mother who lives in a home can be read as a representation of the influence of dementia on the thoughts of every patient. The form thus controverts ideas about identity, selfhood and personal autonomy that we are used to taking for granted.

In order to be able to interpret the relationality of the narrator-focalizers that is, among other things, also expressed by the we-form in which they narrate, we need a different tool than structuralist narratology, that would guide the interpretation. Let us return to the first narrator-focalizer introduced in this chapter, daily bread. Daily bread’s narration and focalization is geared towards one of the three protagonists, not only as far as focus is concerned, but also relationally. It seems to be led by their downright warm feelings for Muriël:

Muriël, on the other hand, we have missed dearly, and she has missed us. She looks like she needs us more than ever. So thin, so tired, so scared [...] But the doubt is gripping her firmly. The paralysing idea that everything depends on whether she will or will not eat us. [...] Come now, love. We are just bread.<sup>409</sup>

Neither the focalization nor the narration makes any pretence to being not neutral – it is coloured by the, mostly positive, relationship that the instances have towards characters and also by the

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<sup>407</sup> “De ouders.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 75.

<sup>408</sup> “Wij zijn twee sigaretten. Wij kennen elkaar niet, we zijn niet eens in dezelfde fabriek gemaakt, maar toch zijn we verbonden, zoals alle sigaretten met elkaar verbonden zijn [...]” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 102.

<sup>409</sup> “Muriël daarentegen hebben we wel degelijk gemist, en zij ons ook. Ze ziet eruit alsof ze ons beter kan gebruiken dan ooit. Zo mager, zo moe, zo bang [...] Maar de twijfel heeft haar in zijn greep. De verlamme gedachte dat alles afhangt van de vraag of ze ons wel of niet zal eten. [...] Meisje toch. We zijn maar brood.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 29.

very act of relating to the people who are touching, using, wearing, eating or being plagued (in the case of doubt or cognitive dissonance) by them. The dynamic can be described tautologically as follows: by means of their relation the narrator focalizers are mainly focused on relations. This seemingly tautological sentence makes use of the two meanings of the word relation. One refers to the specific way in which the twenty-five instances both narrate and perceive at the same time. The first meaning of the noun relation is: “an instance of relating or narrating something; a narrative, an account, a statement”.<sup>410</sup> The second one is: “an attribute denoting or concept expressing a connection, correspondence, or contrast between different things; a particular way in which one thing or idea is connected or associated with another or others [...]”.<sup>411</sup> The verb to relate is, in the sense used in the first quotation from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, used in referring to the activity of the narrator-focalizers that involves both narration and perception. In other words, what the instances are narrating, and perceiving are their relationships with the characters and the way that people relate to them, both as a collective and as individual selves.

We have seen that the relation of the narrator-focalizers to the characters is also strongly affectively charged on the example of the bread. In the previous quotation, the bread related to Muriël in an almost motherly way (“Come now, love.”<sup>412</sup>) It also expresses the wish to fulfill its purpose by being consumed by her: “We are made to meld into one with the human body.”<sup>413</sup> Towards the end of the chapter, the bread’s description of the consumption and digestion that it is looking forward to during its next encounter with Muriël sounds almost sensual: “We are thinking of the mild warmth that suddenly can suddenly overtake her mouth. Of how we get chewed, mixed with melting chocolate sprinkles, pushed around with her tongue and swallowed, past the pinkish-red throat into her tiny, thin body.”<sup>414</sup> Here, focalizers function as centres of perception with all that pertains to it: this is the only way in which the perspective of the bread in the passage quoted above can be understood. It however cannot help us make sense of the emphasis on the relational and affective aspects of focalization. How would a narratologist make sense of the fact that an apparently conscious and thoroughly personified

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<sup>410</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. “relation (n.),” accessed 24 May 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161810?redirectedFrom=relation#eid..>

<sup>411</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. “relation (n.),” accessed 24 May 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161810?redirectedFrom=relation#eid..>

<sup>412</sup> “Meisje toch.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 28.

<sup>413</sup> “Wij zijn gemaakt om met het lichaam van een mens te versmelten.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 28.

<sup>414</sup> “We denken aan de zachte warmte die plotseling kan losbreken in haar mond. Aan hoe we worden gekauwd, vermengd met gesmolten hagelslag, rondgewenteld met haar tong, en doorgeslikt, voorbij de rozerode keel, haar kleine, smalle lichaam in.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 32.

daily bread with a motherly, but also socially critical character (see above the bread's analysis of the state of the society that does not value its daily bread) has a wish or desire to become one with a character's body, to be in the closest possible relation to her that they can be?

#### 4.1.2 The concept of transhistorical frame

In order to interpret the characteristic textual signals of *Wij zijn licht* such as the formal device of kaleidoscopic perception, the narration in first person plural and what I call, following Laurent Berlant, "affect's saturation of form"<sup>415</sup> (illustrated by the bread wanting to become one with Muriël) we need a new interpretive key. This key is going to both direct the interpreter's sight falling on a particular passage of the novel rather than another and delimit the potential meanings that are going to be gleaned from the passage. It also needs to be characterized by a kind of restraint and slowness to judgment. This creates the opportunity to pause and take a step back from a sharp, suspicious analysis that would mercilessly strip back the trick of speaking, thinking, feeling and perceiving daily bread, socks or slow juicer of all their anthropomorphic trimmings. The interpretive key requires a willingness to take the trick seriously, a willingness to play along, to go with it and see to what meanings and interpretations it might lead the interpreter. An ability and willingness to be surprised is also necessary. In other words, the interpretive frame requires a reparative readerly attitude that has already been described and demonstrated in chapter 3. Furthermore, it requires that attention be paid to the textual signals that foreground affective and relational concerns of individual characters and that these are grasped as matters of individual nature, not as determined by a relation to the system. The saturation of the narrator-focalizers' relation by affect might go unnoticed, if the filter by means of which the interpretations of *Wij zijn licht* are going to be produced were not affectively coloured.

The two levels of analysis that I have focused on in previous chapters correspond to two out of three important aspects governing interpretation in Thomas Vaessens' vision. He came up with a didactic<sup>416</sup> concept of a transhistorical frame that he introduced in *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (History of Modern Dutch Literature), published in 2013. A frame is a heuristic concept describing the process by which we arrive at interpretations of texts. As a concept for literary analysis and interpretation it is characterized in two ways: it focuses

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<sup>415</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>416</sup> I call the concept of the transhistorical frame didactic because Vaessens has developed it as an instrument that would help students of the bachelor programme of Dutch studies at UvA (University of Amsterdam) to produce interpretations of historical and contemporary literary texts and that would present literary history (and historiography) of modern Dutch literature in a clear and concise way by means of five frames.



attention at the ways in which we have looked at literary texts throughout the history of modern Dutch literature and pays attention to sets of preferences and predilections that characterize each of the five ways of looking. It is not a period-bound concept and as such is a welcome alternative to periodization which has been shown to be problematic in Chapter 1. Vaessens sees the interpretation process as influenced by three important factors: “the text itself”<sup>417</sup> which is composed of “interrelated constellations of metaphors, symbols, oppositions and other signals that can be found in the text”<sup>418</sup>, “attitude towards literature (poetics)”<sup>419</sup> and “attitude towards modernity (socially-cultural style of thought)”<sup>420</sup>. So far, I have paid attention to the first two factors separately: in chapter 1, I have looked at foregrounding by means of textual signals and in chapter 2 at foregrounding by means of a readerly attitude. The readerly attitude corresponds to the level of poetics in Vaessens’ chart that represents the levels of a frame, because both contain the reader’s presuppositions, preferences and value judgments towards a literary work. I am not going to pay particular attention to the level of the attitude towards modernity because a choice for reparative reading on the level of attitude to literature prioritizes other forms of knowledge production over knowledge produced by means of attention paid to the relationship between the individual and the (social, economical, political) systems. Moreover, the painstaking work of interpreting novels of millennial authors in relation to a critique of systems and ideology has already been thoroughly done by Demeyer and Vitse in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*.

Vaessens defines frames as “cognitive outlines that [...] determine how we see the (literary) reality and that direct the ascription of meaning to literary texts.”<sup>421</sup> Vaessens’ definition of frame stresses the cognitive aspects of the production of interpretations. I want to enrich and modify his concept and account for affective aspects, too, by constructing a new frame, which will result in a heuristic tool combining insights gained by means of the affective dominant and reparative reading. The option to interpret the novel according to one single (period) frame is countered by oscillation, which once again proves to be the defining characteristic of this contemporary novel: the text can be interpreted by means of several frames. The most

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<sup>417</sup> “De tekst zelf.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 110.

<sup>418</sup> “Samenhangende constellaties van metaforen, symbolen, opposities en andere in de tekst aanwijsbare signalen.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 110.

<sup>419</sup> “Houding t. o. v. de literatuur (poëtica).” See diagram on p. 115. Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 115.

<sup>420</sup> “Houding t. o. v. de moderniteit (sociaal-culturele denkstijl).” See diagram on p. 115. Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 115.

<sup>421</sup> “Cognitieve schema’s die [...] bepalen hoe we de (literaire) werkelijkheid zien en die de toekenning van betekenis aan literaire teksten sturen.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 110.

productive way to read the novel, however, is not by means of any of the already defined frames, but by means of a new frame. An interpretation according to this new frame combines attention to the affective dominant on the level of textual signals. On the level of the attitude to literature the frame is characterized by reparative reading and commitment. As for the third factor, attitude to modernity, I am departing from a realization that the processes of modernity are always shaping and determining the historical horizon within which both Gerda Blee and I have written our respective works (she a novel, I a dissertation). However, within this determining relationship of the individual and the system, there is still space for the individual to decide not to pay attention to these aspects in their interpretation and choose the speculative approach. Reparative reading fits into the broader category of speculative approaches as one of the practices as I have made clear in chapter 1.

I am focusing on kaleidoscopic perception as the main textual signal in this chapter because this innovation of the novelistic form has not yet been thoroughly investigated in Dutch literary critique of the novels of authors of millennial generation. The only source that does make short and summary mentions of the formal aspects of the millennial novels is Op de Beek and Van Dijk's article "2014 – Niña Weijers en Nina Polak: een nieuwe generatie auteurs maakt naam" (2014 - Niña Weijers and Nina Polak: New Generation of Authors Make a Name for Themselves). The authors mention the lack of a unified perspective in these novels and make a note of a similar formal experiment in other novels of millennial authors that I am going to refer to as kaleidoscopic perception in *Wij zijn licht*. Op de Beek and Van Dijk describe this formal aspect as follows: "The central experiencing (often male) subject of the modernist novel no longer exists *as such*."<sup>422</sup> Op de Beek and Van Dijk describe and gather the various characteristics of the numerous and diverse group of millennial novels under the denominator relationism. Taking a cue from their terminology, I am going to call the new frame, that I need to construct in order to interpret the effect of the kaleidoscopic perception, relational. Unlike Van Dijk and Op de Beek who use the term to refer to the characteristics of literary works themselves, I am using relationism to characterize a new frame that guides interpretation.

I will now look at how the novel's characteristic form (kaleidoscopic perception) enables oscillation between a modernist, postmodernist and relational frame. I am going to use the

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<sup>422</sup> "Het centraal waarnemende (meestal mannelijke) subject van de modernistische roman bestaat niet meer *as such*." Esther Op de Beek and Yra van Dijk, "Niña Weijers en Nina Polak. Een nieuwe generatie auteurs maakt naam" *DWB*, No 3 (September, 2019), 66.

modernist and postmodernist frame to illustrate what parts of the text an interpretation according to each interpretive key would focus on and how the meanings arrived at about the form would change. Out of the five frames already defined by Vaessens in his book about literary history, I have chosen the modernist and postmodernist one on the basis of Van den Akker and Vermeulen's definition of oscillation: "metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern."<sup>423</sup> These two frames are going to be seen as a continuity with the past that *Wij zijn licht* draws on. In this context, the relational frame is going to function as an innovative element. Similarly, to how the principle of oscillation has functioned in the first chapter, the oscillating movement will also take place between an element of continuity and one of innovation.

#### 4.2 Interpretation of kaleidoscopic perception through the modernist frame

I begin with the interpretation of the textual signal of the kaleidoscopic perception from the modernist frame. McHale sees "multiple focalization and juxtaposed perspective"<sup>424</sup> as belonging to "the repertoire of modernist devices".<sup>425</sup> The formal device can also be seen as reflecting an attitude to modernity. From within the modernist frame as defined by Vaessens, the fragmentation of perception is "to be read as a reflection of the modern reality that is experienced as chaotic."<sup>426</sup> An interpreter observing the kaleidoscopic perception of *Wij zijn licht* through the modernist frame would see the novel as "a unity that is provisionally set up against the threatening (because banal and chaotic) outside world."<sup>427</sup> The centrifugal tendencies (resulting from having each chapter narrated and focalized by someone or something) create chaos and contradiction in which the interpretation according to the modernist frame should create order and unity. In combination with the investigative and crime-related modernist tendency of the storyline, the textual signal of kaleidoscopic perception would, according to the modernist frame, be interpreted as contributing to the search for truth. In the case of *Wij zijn licht*, this would mean that the mutually contradicting and supplementing perspectives would have to add up to each other and reveal the previously unknown circumstances of Elisabeth's death. The modernist frame with its predilections and preferences would thus steer the interpretation in the direction of a search for unity. Unity is in this case

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<sup>423</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen "Notes on Metamodernism," 5.

<sup>424</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 19.

<sup>425</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 19.

<sup>426</sup> "Te lezen als afspiegeling van de als chaotisch ervaren moderne werkelijkheid." Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 324.

<sup>427</sup> "Een eenheid die, provisorisch, tegen de dreigende (want banale en chaotische) buitenwereld wordt ingezet." Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 326.

represented by the one true version of events that would emerge from behind the competing perspectives: “those reading from the modernist frame will look for unity”,<sup>428</sup> claims Vaessens.

The heuristic concept of the frame emphasizing the process of interpretation and the focus on predilections and value or esthetic judgments that are inextricably linked with a particular frame are clearly illustrated by Vaessens on the example of the modernist frame. He explains the preferences of the modernist frame on the example of “Dutch school handbooks of poetics”<sup>429</sup> which teach interpretation based on a preference and an assumption of the autonomy of a literary text: “that the literary text is ideally a perfect, wondrously ingenious composition and that it is up to the reader to explicate its internal consistency.”<sup>430</sup> This assumption of autonomy of a literary text defining the way interpretation is taught in Dutch education (both secondary and at universities) is shown to originate from the poetical preferences of a single (although highly influential) author, T. S. Eliot: “literary critics [...] have practically transferred Nijhoff’s (and: Eliot’s) poetics into a set of reading rules.”<sup>431</sup> For many Dutch literary critics, the<sup>432</sup> undisputable dogma of autonomy of a literary text (“the artwork has a cohesion that has detached itself even from its maker”)<sup>433</sup> is therefore relativized and contextualized by Vaessens’ tracking of it back to the poetics of one English writer or one Dutch writer (Martinus Nijhoff). Vaessens’ description of the modernist frame thus reveals that the structuralist idea of an analysis of an autonomous literary text as a way to get at the objective and conclusive interpretation of said text is in fact historically contingent. The frame is therefore a tool that leads to a reflection on the datedness and conditionality of interpretations. This is why both of the levels that Vaessens uses to define each frame are composed of attitudes: to literature (poetics) and to modernity (socio-cultural framework). It is this type of reflection on literary and aesthetic preferences involved in the process of interpretation that the use of the heuristic concept of a frame affords and that would not be so obvious if we used the mechanism of foregrounding exclusively.

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<sup>428</sup> “Wie leest vanuit het modernistische frame zal naar samenhang zoeken.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 325.

<sup>429</sup> “Nederlandse schoolpoëtica’s.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 311.

<sup>430</sup> “Dat de literaire tekst idealiter een volmaakte, wonderlijk-ingenieuze compositie is en dat het aan de lezer is de samenhang ervan te expliciteren.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 311.

<sup>431</sup> “Literatuurwetenschappers [...] hebben Nijhoffs (en: Eliots) poëtische denkstijl praktisch vertaald in een set van leesregels.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 306.

<sup>432</sup> Vaessens mentions Wiljan van den Akker and Gillis Dorleijn among the Dutch scholars for whom the primacy of literary autonomy has assumed the role of “collectief geloof” (Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 310). Collective belief.

<sup>433</sup> “Het kunstwerk heeft een samenhang die zich zelfs van de maker heeft losgezongen.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 303.

There are two reasons why the kaleidoscopic perception in *Wij zijn licht* does not fulfil the goal of interpretation according to the modernist frame which Vaessens defines as “the reconstruction of a hidden unity behind the text which opens the text and reveals its one true meaning.”<sup>434</sup> Firstly, in the story of Elisabeth’s death, there is no hidden truth that could be uncovered by peeling off the layered perspectives and ordering them in such a way that truth would see the light of day. There is no unifying centre from which meaning would flow. After all the narrator-focalizers have shared their perspective and revealed their knowledge, the incident of Elisabeth’s death remains just as unremarkable and unspectacular as it has seemed at first sight. Elisabeth has died a quiet, fully preventable, and, in that sense, tragic, death. In the course of the novel, however, the investigation of her housemates does not reveal any new information about her death than that which has been given by the narrator-focalizer of the first chapter (the night) that reports on the time of her death. All of this goes against the expectations of the detective story genre, some of whose characteristics *Wij zijn licht* nevertheless seems to possess and which, as has been mentioned in Chapter 2, is a preferred genre for the modernist dominant according to McHale because it creates the opportunity to foreground epistemological questions.

Secondly, the characteristics of the perspective and perception, namely limitedness and apparent partiality towards the characters, obstruct the goal of a search for truth. The limitedness of narrator’s perspective is a characteristic that appears also in *Absalom, Absalom*, a text that McHale tests his hypothesis of epistemological dominant of modernism on. On his view, the “biased or underinformed or otherwise unreliable informants”<sup>435</sup> foreground the problematization of “such epistemological themes as the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the different structuring imposed on the ‘same’ knowledge by different minds, and the problem of ‘unknowability’ or the limits of knowledge”.<sup>436</sup> In *Wij zijn licht*, the limitedness and specificity of the narrator-focalizer’s relation does not serve the purpose of complicating epistemology. If we were to evaluate the narrator-focalizer’s reliability, the objections to it would have to be motivated by their affection for the characters and the partiality with which they represent them, rather than by their lack of knowledge.

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<sup>434</sup> “Het achterhalen van een verborgen eenheid achter de tekst, die de tekst opent en er dé betekenis van blootlegt.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 316.

<sup>435</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 8.

<sup>436</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 9.

We have seen this closeness and fondness towards a character on the example of daily bread's relationship to Muriël. This is the case also with other facilitators: Melodie's last questioning is reported on by the handmade socks from her mother. Melodie was wearing them on the day of Elisabeth's death and was arrested. The socks' account of the situation is influenced by their understanding for and empathetic attitude towards Melodie:

Considering all the misery that has troubled her afterwards, she has at least still had two soft familiar pieces of clothing on her cold feet. [...] Her sister dead, she arrested, isolated from her housemates and it all happened so suddenly. Such things do not leave a sensitive person like Melodie unscathed.<sup>437</sup>

The relationality of the socks' perception does not prevent them, however, from pointing out the small but crucial differences between Melodie's version of the events and their observations of the situation on the night in question:

Do not misunderstand our meaning, we love Melodie very much. We could not imagine a better destiny for our life than to keep her feet warm. But sometimes, we do not completely understand why she is so inaccurate when she reports on the things that we have experienced with her. Now, for example, now that she says that they were all quiet and let Elisabeth sleep, now she's not being completely accurate, because at the time when Elisabeth went to sleep on the couch, Muriël started speaking, it seems to us.<sup>438</sup>

The use of the kaleidoscopic perception as the central formal device of this novel does not obstruct or complicate the grasp of the story. It is not used in order to complicate the search for the true rendition of events which might be the function that this formal device would serve in other novels telling the story of an investigation of someone's death under suspicious circumstances. The limitedness of the relation thus does not make the narrator-focalizers unreliable but shows that affective and relational concerns rather than ones which would cause

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<sup>437</sup> "Bij alle narigheid die haar daarna is overkomen heeft ze tenminste steeds twee zachte vertrouwde kledingstukken aan haar kouwelijke voeten gehad. [...] Haar zus dood, zij gearresteerd, gescheiden van haar huisgenoten, en dat allemaal zo opeens. Zulke dingen gaan een gevoelig iemand als Melodie niet in de koude kleren zitten." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 159.

<sup>438</sup> "Begrijp ons niet verkeerd, wij houden veel van Melodie. Wij zouden ons geen betere levensvervulling kunnen wensen dan het warmhouden van haar voeten. Maar wij begrijpen soms niet helemaal waarom ze zo onzorgvuldig is als ze vertelt over de dingen die we met haar hebben meegemaakt. Nu bijvoorbeeld, nu ze zegt dat ze allemaal stil waren en Elisabeth lieten slapen, nu is ze niet helemaal precies, want nadat Elisabeth op de bank was gaan liggen begon Muriël juist wel te praten, dachten wij." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 162.

questions around epistemology, saturate the narration and focalization and by extension also the form. The effect of the form can therefore not be captured by means of the modernist frame on the level of textual signals.

The possibility to fully interpret the textual signal of kaleidoscopic perception by means of the modernist frame is blocked for yet another reason. The assumption that the text “is an organic whole where each part has a function”<sup>439</sup> is a characteristic of poetics that form “one of the cornerstones of the modernist frame”.<sup>440</sup> The kaleidoscopic perception in *Wij zijn licht* however contains an instance that disrupts the projected unity that it is the goal of the interpretation of the modernist frame to create. An interpreter looking at the text through a modernist pair of glasses would therefore be forced to conclude that their attempt at interpretation of *Wij zijn licht* according to the modernist frame has ultimately failed because of a flaw in the text concerning the crucial standard of literary autonomy. The metatextual element of the “storyline”<sup>441</sup> that takes on narration and focalization in chapter 17 and reflects on the choices of the author during the process of writing, disrupts the autonomy of the novel by making a reference to the author and the world in which it functions as a story. For this reason, we must now abandon the modernist frame and move on to a different one. The oscillating movement enabled by the form of the novel leads us on to the interpretation according to the postmodernist frame.

The storyline’s account invites interpretation through the postmodernist frame rather than the modernist frame. Because the interpretation according to the modernist frame is focused on unity, the one narrator-focalizer that is out of line because it functions on a metafictional level, disrupts the unity and necessitates a shift to a different frame, as part of the oscillating movement between different interpretations that I am observing in this chapter. The appearance of the ‘storyline’ as a separate narrator-focalizer at the same time disrupts the possibility of gathering all textual signals into one coherent explanation which is what interpretation according to the modernist frame attempts to do.

### 4.3 Interpretation of the kaleidoscopic perception through the postmodernist frame

The fact that the textual signal of kaleidoscopic perception contains an instance that can be seen as a case of extreme reflexivity requires a change of the interpretive frame, because the narrator-focalizer ‘storyline’ winks, as it were, at the reader self-consciously, saying: ‘Look at

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<sup>439</sup> “Is een organisch geheel waarin elk onderdeel een functie heeft.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 313.

<sup>440</sup> “Een van de hoekstenen van het modernistische frame.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 326.

<sup>441</sup> “Verhaal.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 144.

me being a trick and knowing it; watch me reflecting on it and having some fun with this metatextual game.’ This self-reflexiveness caused by having the storyline assume the role of a narrator-focalizer is reminiscent of a postmodernist trick where the author breaks the boundary between the real and the fictional world and appears in the latter, thus forcibly alerting the reader to the constructedness of the fictional world of the novel. Such a complication of the ontological horizon of fiction famously appears in English literature in John Fowles’ *French Lieutenant’s Woman*.<sup>442</sup> In Dutch literature, this formal device is used, for example, by Cees Nooteboom in *Paradijs verloren* (Paradise Lost), to give just one example. Seen from the postmodern frame, the appearance of the storyline as a narrator and focalizer that creates a metalevel on which a commentary on the novel’s story and the decisions of the author is given, is an innovation on this tried-and-true postmodern formal device.

Bart Vervaeck characterizes the worldview distilled out of postmodern novels as almost tautological “because the postmodern novel shows the fictional character of the world so explicitly.”<sup>443</sup> He sees “this piercing of the illusion of fiction”<sup>444</sup> as “a commentary on the traditional description of reality”.<sup>445</sup> A storyline that takes the narrating and focalizing role on can therefore be interpreted from within the postmodern frame as a play with the conventions of realism. This coincides with Vaessens’ more general description of the difference between the modernist and the postmodernist frame:

Where the modernist frame a readerly attitude suggests that attempts to demonstrate how all parts of the text have a function in and for the whole, there the deconstructive reading of the postmodernist frame rather shows the text as a battlefield of both unifying and disjointing forces.<sup>446</sup>

Interpretation according to the postmodern frame is seen as deconstructive: “A reading that is not attempting to find a unity or the core of the text, but that is rather focused on contradictions

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<sup>442</sup> More examples of this procedure can be found in chapter 8 of McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction*.

<sup>443</sup> “Omdat een postmoderne roman zo expliciet het fictionele karakter toont van de wereld.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 18.

<sup>444</sup> “Dit doorprikken van een fictionele illusie.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 19.

<sup>445</sup> “Een commentaar op de traditionele omschrijving van de realiteit.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 19.

<sup>446</sup> “Waar het modernistische frame een leeshouding ingeeft die probeert aan te tonen hoe alle tekstdelen een functie hebben voor het geheel, daar laat de deconstructieve leeswijze van het postmodernistische frame juist zien hoe een tekst het strijdtoneel is van zowel eenheidsforcerende als eenheidsondermijnende krachten.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 384.



and meaningful details.”<sup>447</sup> It is therefore logical that interpretation according to the postmodern frame will focus on elements that undermine coherence or point to the constructedness of the unity of the fictional world, such as the metafictional commentary of the storyline on its own development.

The storyline gives a metacommentary on both the conventions of interpretation according to the modernist frame as well as on the postmodernist frame. Chapter 17 offers a couple of interpretive keys for the novel as a whole and can thus attempt to influence the conclusions of the interpretation by providing this reflection on the metalevel. One of the suggestions on how the novel could be interpreted is offered in the storyline’s mention of the genre of a detective story: “There are enough stories that are allowed to give conclusive explanations for the things that happen. Detectives, for example, where all the relevant motives and plot twists become uncovered at the end.”<sup>448</sup> This metacommentary points in the direction of the modernist frame which has already been discussed. The storyline would like to see the form in which it is being told to serve the purpose of leading to definitive conclusions from which it would be possible to distil one core of interpretation. The fact that in chapter seventeen out of the total twenty-five “the substantial elements of the detective are missing, such as the serious crime and the promise of the conclusion about who did it”<sup>449</sup> makes the storyline that apparently rather values faithfulness to genre characteristics “a hunch that it will be an anti-climax.”<sup>450</sup> The preference of the storyline seems to be for more clarity, more suspense and a more black-and-white characterization. Its two suggestions for the improvement of the story for the sake of clarity and suspense are: “a big fight [...] that no one knows about yet, not even the investigation team and that this will finally be revealed during Melodie’s interrogation.”<sup>451</sup> Its second suggestion is to give the story an obvious antagonist, for example by “painting a much better picture of the man of the nine-day process, this Maruko, as a convinced proclaimer of harmful views.”<sup>452</sup> The storyline wishes to contain drama and shocking revelations that would make it more exciting

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<sup>447</sup> “Een leeswijze die er niet op uit is een eenheid in de tekst te vinden of een kern, maar die veeleer gericht is op contradicties en veelbetekenende details.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 384.

<sup>448</sup> “Er zijn genoeg verhalen die wel gewoon sluitende verklaringen mogen geven voor de dingen die gebeuren. Detectives bijvoorbeeld, waarin alle relevante motieven en verwickelingen op het einde bloot komen te liggen.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 147.

<sup>449</sup> “De substantiële elementen van de detective ontbreken, zoals de serieuze misdaad en de belofte van uitsluitel over wie het heeft gedaan.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 150.

<sup>450</sup> “Vermoeden dat het een anti-climax wordt.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 144.

<sup>451</sup> “Een grote ruzie [...] waar nog niemand iets van weet, ook de rechtermensen niet en dat dit op het laatst aan het licht komt tijdens het verhoor van Melodie.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 146.

<sup>452</sup> “Die man van het negendagenproces nog veel beter in beeld brengen, die Maruko, als overtuigd verkondiger van schadelijke denkbeelden.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 146.

and more befitting of the genre of the detective novel. The interpretation according to the postmodernist frame concludes that this uncovers the rules according to which stories in the genre of detective or thriller are constructed.

The storyline's metacommentary can be seen as an ironic and self-reflexive reflection on the conventions of the genre. Vaessens calls the norm of self-reflexivity "the most important poetical norm [...] of the postmodernist frame".<sup>453</sup> The storyline however does not only comment on what it wishes it was, but also on what it is: "[...] until now, the writer has deliberately kept us unsatisfying and ambiguous."<sup>454</sup> The commentary on the intentions of the author can also be seen as a utilization of the postmodern poetic norms: "The writer – and who should know her intentions with us better than we do – wants to make it seem as if Elisabeth is a great enigma that cannot be solved, a black hole that can only be perceived through the movements of everything else around it."<sup>455</sup> This is an application of the idea of the core of the postmodern novel as emptiness. Vervaeck says the following about the use of imagery in postmodern novel: "the centre is always the absence"<sup>456</sup> and the novel is constructed around this absence. The commentary of the storyline corresponding to the postmodernist frame, interprets Elisabeth as the absent center of *Wij zijn licht*. This illustrates not only that in the function of the narrator-focalizer the storyline 'reads' the novel through the filter of the postmodern frame but also how it influences foregrounding of certain textual signals and their interpretation. Chapter 17 undermines the content of the story and provides metacommentary on the form of the novel: "You will have to make do with elaborate descriptions of their last day in custody [...] We have already announced this: nothing of note."<sup>457</sup> Because of the extreme self-reflexiveness of form that the choice for the storyline as a focalizer suggests, chapter 17 is a breaking point in the novel.

The storyline offers the reader an interpretive key based on the postmodernist frame by emphasizing the role of the reader that leads to a focus on ambiguity as a result of the interpretation:

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<sup>453</sup> "De belangrijkste poëtische norm [...] in het postmodernistische frame." Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 387.

<sup>454</sup> "[...] de schrijver heeft ons tot nu toe moedwillig onbevredigend en ambigu gehouden." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 147.

<sup>455</sup> "De schrijver – wie zou haar intenties met ons beter doorzien dan wij – wil het doen voorkomen alsof Elisabeth een groot raadsel is dat niet kan worden opgelost, een zwart gat dat alleen kan worden waargenomen via de bewegingen van alles eromheen." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 147.

<sup>456</sup> "De kern is altijd het afwezige." Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 47.

<sup>457</sup> "U zult het verder moeten doen met omstandige beschrijvingen van hun laatste dag in hechtenis [...]. We hebben het al aangekondigd: niets noemenswaardig." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 151.

[...] this does not do us, as a story, any favours, definitely not in combination with you, the reader, because willingly or unwillingly, you, as well as the writer can be charged with all the confusion that appears. [...] All the effort that it costs us to remain ourselves, in spite of all the ambiguity that the writer has burdened us with and then in you come and simply make something else out of us, a bad reproduction full of hiatuses and wrong assumptions and interpretations.<sup>458</sup>

The storyline is commenting on the role that the reader plays in the interpretive process and frames it in postmodern terms here. Within the postmodernist frame, when it comes to the production of meaning, writing and reading are seen as similar processes: “Meaning is the result of interaction: it is not discovered as a given in the text but created in an interactive process between the reader and the text.”<sup>459</sup> The invitation that the reader receives within the postmodernist frame to participate in the construction of the meaning of the story is implied in the positive connotations that Vaessens gives to openness, “a central metaphorical opposition”<sup>460</sup> defining the level of attitude to modernity within the postmodernist frame.<sup>461</sup> It is this postmodern poetic norm that the storyline seems to depart from in its appeal to the reader. The storyline’s attitude to this norm however cannot be described as an enthusiastic acceptance and exploitation of the freeing potential that “the text in question does not contain only one or true meaning.”<sup>462</sup> The playfulness and celebration of the proliferation of meaning and imagery that, according to Vervaeck, characterizes the postmodern novel<sup>463</sup> does not describe the attitude of the storyline when it bemoans the fact that the reader has warped the story in their head. On the contrary, the storyline seems rather certain of what it is and wishes to be received so (although it would most of all like to be a thrilling detective story). The tone that the storyline employs in order to signal this need for attention to what it is, comes across as rather forceful

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<sup>458</sup> “[...] dat doet ons als verhaal geen goed, zeker niet in combinatie met u, de lezer, want bedoeld of onbedoeld, hebt u net zo goed als de schrijver schuld aan alle onduidelijkheid. [...] Al die moeite die wij doen om onszelf te blijven, dwars door alle meerduidigheid heen waarmee de schrijver ons heeft opgezadeld, en dan maakt u er in uw hoofd gewoon iets anders van, een slechte reproductie vol hiaten en niet-kloppende aannames en interpretaties.” Bles, *Wij zijn licht*, 147-148.

<sup>459</sup> “Betekenis is het resultaat van interactie: ze is niet ‘ontdekt’ als een gegeven in de tekst, maar gecreëerd in een interactief proces tussen lezer en tekst.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 386.

<sup>460</sup> “Een centrale metaforische oppositie.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 117.

<sup>461</sup> See Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 118.

<sup>462</sup> “In de betreffende tekst niet één juiste of ware betekenis vervat is.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 385.

<sup>463</sup> See Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 47.

and didactic: “On this occasion we would also like to urge you to read more carefully from this point on so that in your head you would deform us as little as possible.”<sup>464</sup>

There is one more narrator-focalizer who raises ontological questions characteristic for postmodern texts according to McHale and whose relation comments on a characteristic of the postmodernist frame on the level of attitude to modernity. The postmodernist attitude to modernity is characterized by the question of “legitimation of scientific knowledge”.<sup>465</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard calls these legitimating discourses metanarratives and claims “that we came to see the reliance of modern science on the grand narratives as problematic.”<sup>466</sup> A commune that believes in being able to survive on a diet of light described in *Wij zijn licht* is an element of the story that requires interpretation from the postmodernist frame. The critique on the articles of faith of “Commune Sound and Love”<sup>467</sup> is given by an imaginary butterfly, narrating Chapter 10. Like the storyline, the butterfly also raises concerns about ontology but in a different way. It is made-up, an image invented by Muriël that is supposed to inspire her in the course of therapy that she started out on with Melodie: “we are also not a real butterfly, we are a product of Muriëls spirit.”<sup>468</sup> Unlike the storyline, the butterfly is a part of the fictional world and does not break through its limits to a metalevel on which the storyline’s reflection occurs.

The relation of the butterfly uncovers the commune’s belief in “universal life energy”<sup>469</sup> as a metanarrative. It also relates the sadness that it feels when being confronted with the fact that its creator, Muriël, does not realize that her belief in the light diet is “a narrative construction that gives coherence to phenomena.”<sup>470</sup> The critical and rationally minded butterfly dismantles the belief in living based on air and light, by referring to scientific knowledge: “Air and light, Muriël [...] You have been to school, haven’t you? You must have learned how to count, or not? You know very well that there are natural laws that we all must bow down to [...]”<sup>471</sup> By using this argument based on scientific knowledge, the butterfly is replaying a paradox of the postmodern attitude towards metanarratives that Vaessens describes: “The modern science

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<sup>464</sup> “Waarbij we u dan wel op het hart zouden willen drukken om vanaf dit punt iets beter op te letten, zodat u ons zo min mogelijk zult vervormen in uw hoofd.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 151.

<sup>465</sup> “Legitimatie van (wetenschappelijke) kennis.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 369.

<sup>466</sup> “Dat we het beroep van de moderne wetenschap op grote verhalen als problematisch zijn gaan zien.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 370.

<sup>467</sup> “Woongroep Klank en Liefde.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 69.

<sup>468</sup> “Wij zijn dan ook geen echte vlinder; wij zijn een product van Muriëls geest.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 84.

<sup>469</sup> “Universele levensenergie.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 49.

<sup>470</sup> “Een narratieve constructie die samenhang geeft aan verschijnselen.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 370.

<sup>471</sup> “Lucht en licht, Muriël! [...] Je bent toch naar school geweest? Je hebt toch wel leren rekenen? Je weet toch wel dat er natuurwetten bestaan waaraan we allemaal moeten beantwoorden [...]?” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 90.

discounts the made-up stories, but for the legitimation of its rules it makes use of such narratives once again.”<sup>472</sup> The interpretation of this chapter through the postmodernist frame seems to suggest that there is no escaping from the power of metanarratives. This is a movement that appears frequently in the novel. The characters often express their critique of the rules, habits and presuppositions governing the functioning of the majority of society. Melodie criticizes the “terrible and cold system”<sup>473</sup> of the health and justice providers that she is subjected to on the night of Elisabeth’s death. Hansje criticizes “the destruction of nature through industry”<sup>474</sup> under the influence of *Dode lente (Silent Spring)* by Rachel Carson. Petrus mentions “the failure of society that has harmed Elisabeth so much, that has made her sick to death.”<sup>475</sup>

Their solutions to the often rightful and justifiable social critique are however very dubious and lead them into the arms of an even more dangerous metanarrative, namely the belief in light diet. It seems as if there are no collective solutions available for the problems experienced by vulnerable members of society, such as the people who have gathered in the commune. The novel here illustrates a principle that we have seen play out in the public sphere during the coronavirus pandemic, namely that members of our society who were already marginalised and excluded have lost the last shreds of trust in the society and its institutions (such as democratic government). This has directed both the members of the commune in the novel into the arms of charlatans and gurus promising enlightenment and independence of said society and our marginalised fellow citizens into the arms of opinion-makers on Youtube and dabblers in alternative facts. Both in the case of the members of “Commune Sound and Love”<sup>476</sup> and in the case of excluded members of our society, the embrace of alternative facts and conspiracies leads to an even further isolation from the mainstream of the public debate. This is an aspect of the novel that Blees herself comments on in the interview with De Veen in NRC:

(De Veen:) But it seems to me to have received a new meaning during the pandemic: it is a story about the dangerous side of such an alternatively thinking group with tunnel vision that does not allow for questions or doubts.

(Blees:) Shortly after the book appeared, the country was just in lockdown, I thought: a commune, who’s going to want to read about that? But later I saw that we lived more

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<sup>472</sup> “De moderne wetenschap rekent af met verzonnen verhalen, maar beroept zich ter legitimatie van haar spelregels opnieuw op zulke verhalen.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 370.

<sup>473</sup> “Verschrikkelijk en koud systeem.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 43.

<sup>474</sup> “De vernietiging van de natuur door de industrie.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 80.

<sup>475</sup> “Het falen van de maatschappij, die Elisabeth zo heeft beschadigd, die haar doodziek heeft gemaakt.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 172.

<sup>476</sup> “Woongroep Klank en Liefde.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 69.

and more in the dynamic of the book, in various bubbles that were increasingly less in touch with each other.<sup>477</sup>

The socially critical aspect of the novel turned out to have a prophetic value, among others. I am quoting the author here, despite the fact that my methodology is not very author-centered because apart from several interviews and reviews, not much else has been published about the novel in the Dutch public sphere or the academia.

Summarizing the interpretation according to the postmodernist frame in general terms, the focus of both the postmodernist and the modernist frame is on the relationship between the text and the world. I have demonstrated this in the previous paragraph where, similarly to the paranoid reading of *Klont* in the previous chapter, the similarity between a scenario in the novel and in the world has made me assume a stance akin to the systems critique characteristic of the paranoid attitude. Within the modernist frame, the focus is on how literature attempts to represent the world and within the postmodernist frame, literature attempts to create a world.<sup>478</sup> The orientation towards reality and the tools with which the two frames confront the complications that language and consciousness pose within the relationship text - world are suggested in this comparison that Vervaeck makes between modernist and postmodernist novels: “To figure out the world, this is what a postmodernist wants. They do not approach the job from a clinically-diagnostical point of view, like a modernist who analyses the fragmentation and estrangement of the world, but rather by means of images.”<sup>479</sup> The focus on the representation and referentiality within these two frames is manifest. The consequence of the disruption of the illusion of a fictional world as a reality caused by the storyline’s metacommentary on the form and content of the novel as a whole is minimal. The formal device of kaleidoscopic perception, which has served to expose the constructedness of the realist convention, simply continues to be used after this destabilizing move in chapter 17. This

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<sup>477</sup> “(De Veen:) Maar het kreeg door corona een nieuwe lading, lijkt me: het is een verhaal over het gevaar van zo'n 'andersdenkende' groep met tunnelvisie, waar geen ruimte is voor vragen of twijfels.

(Blees:) Toen het boek net uit was, het land was net in lockdown, dacht ik: een woongroep, wie zit hier nog op te wachten? Maar later zag ik dat we steeds meer in een dynamiek als in het boek leefden, in verschillende bubbels die steeds minder met elkaar in contact kwamen.” De Veen, “Je kan iemand niet dwingen anders te gaan denken”.

<sup>478</sup> McHale suggests as much in his analysis of how epistemological problems in *Absalom, Absalom* turn into ontological ones. When the limits of knowledge are reached, there is no other option than to „project a world“ (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 10).

<sup>479</sup> “De wereld doorzien, dat is wat de postmodernist wil. Hij gaat daarbij niet klinisch-diagnosticerend te werk zoals de modernist die de verbroekeling en de vervreemding van de wereld analyseert maar eerder beeldend.” Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, 43.

suggests that the complication of relationship between text and reality characteristic for both the interpretation of form from the modernist and the postmodernist frame is not the function for which the formal device of the kaleidoscopic narration is being employed in *Wij zijn licht*.

Despite this powerful reference to the constructedness of the fictional world that breaks up its ontological horizon and the deconstruction of metanarratives that the commune believes, the rest of the novel does not deviate from the realistic convention nor from the formal device of kaleidoscopic perception. This suggests that the form needs to be interpreted from a different frame than the postmodernist one. This is the second oscillating movement that needs to be made in the interpretation of form in this novel. In what follows, I am going to describe how the form of kaleidoscopic perception, specifically through the characterization of the narrators, can be interpreted through the relational frame and what meaning such an interpretation can produce. By means of the heuristic of oscillation, we have seen how the interpretation of formal aspects in *Wij zijn licht* moves from one frame to another. Furthermore, it is clear that the interpretive keys offered by neither the modernist nor the postmodernist frame are able to fully account for the effect of the formal device of kaleidoscopic perception. The interpretation of the novel from the modernist and postmodernist frames has shed light on the aspect of continuities in interpretation. *Wij zijn licht* is characterized by oscillation between interpretations that hark back to already defined frames and the need for innovative frameworks of interpretation which will be discussed now.

#### 4.4 Interpretation of the kaleidoscopic perception from the relational frame

In the rest of this chapter I will further develop my claim from its beginning, namely that an interpretation of the textual signal kaleidoscopic perception, requires the construction of a new frame. I will discuss two aspects of the relational frame, paying attention to textual signals foregrounding affective questions and to reparative reading on the level of attitude to literature. The attention paid to the affective aspects of interpretation within the relational frame enriches the proposal for transhistorical frames made by Vaessens. Regarding *Wij zijn licht*, the reparative position defining the relational frame on the level of readerly attitude, when applied to a textual signal of kaleidoscopic perception means taking the device of the personified objects, phenomena and functions as narrator-focalizers at face value, taking their perceptions and voices seriously, approaching their record of relations with empathy and by means of a phenomenological focus, considering their relation to be a record of their experience and

consciousness. From the paranoid position, one could be entertaining the suspicion that the perceptions and perspectives transmitted by the narrator-focalizers are merely a cloaking device for an omniscient narrator who is manipulating the incidents in such a way that only certain aspects of the story would come to light or in order to attain a certain effect. This perspective would shed a light on the system-critical aspects of the story as has been suggested by the interpretation according to the postmodernist frame already. I have talked about the critique of the society that various member of the commune express. In that case, a frame informed by the paranoid readerly attitude would however miss the specific affective and relational means by which *Wij zijn licht* is attaining its effect.

Firstly, let us look at how textual signals indicate affective and relational concerns in the novel. The narrator-focalizers, as has been previously mentioned, are mainly attempting to convey the nature and characteristics of their relations to the characters. The relation is affectively charged, mostly positively by the warm, friendly and empathetic attitude of the narrator-focalizers. The relations between the narrator-focalizers and characters do not only influence the perception of the characters, it also works the other way around. One could say that the interaction of the objects and phenomena with the humans, has made them personified, or person-like. This effect does not only refer to the narrator-focalizers being represented as conscious but also to the fact that they are capable of and imbued with affect. Here is an illustration of the relationship of the slowjuicer to Muriël from its inner monologue in the penultimate chapter: “She’s here, she’s home. With a bit of luck, she walks straight through into the kitchen to give us a silent kiss on our side, or to lay her cheek against us.”<sup>480</sup> The slowjuicer desires Muriël’s presence, has warm feelings towards her (“Muriël, a woman after our own heart”<sup>481</sup>) and desires to be used by her, not only because it would mean fulfilling the purpose for which it was made, but also because it would make Muriël touch it, be in close contact with it: “And then the moment has finally come. Muriël comes into the kitchen.”<sup>482</sup> The narration of the slowjuicer in chapter 24 gets saturated with the affect of the machine towards Muriël because at a certain point, it starts taking over the dialogue and superposes its desires over Muriël’s: “‘Take a bit more tea.’ Muriël does not want any tea. She wants carrots. She wants oranges. She wants us. And we want her.”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> “Ze is er, ze is thuis. Met een beetje geluk loopt ze meteen door naar de keuken om ons een geluidloze kus op onze zijkant te komen geven, of haar wang tegen ons aan te leggen.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 207.

<sup>481</sup> “Muriël, een vrouw naar ons hart.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 210.

<sup>482</sup> “En dan is het moment eindelijk aangebroken. Muriël komt de keuken binnenlopen.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 210.

<sup>483</sup> “‘Neem nog een beetje thee.’ Muriël wil geen thee. Ze wil wortels. Ze wil sinaasappels. Ze wil ons. En wij willen haar.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 213.



I am going to call the effect where the narrator-focalizers' affect colours both the narration and the perception of the fictional world the *affective saturation of form*. It is an effect (a result of interpretation) that follows from the use of kaleidoscopic perception as a textual signal when interpreted within the relational frame. The structuralist narratological analysis would have been able to direct our attention to such moments of colouring of the perception of narrator-focalizer but would be unable to make sense of it. This necessitates the construction of a new frame because neither the modernist, nor the postmodernist frame with their cognitive and linguistic focus are able to pay attention to these aspects, nor do they have the instruments available that would allow for an interpretation of these textual signals. How can we however make a claim of anthropomorphic affect in objects of daily use, psychological processes, social functions or abstract phenomena? This is an elaboration on reparative reading's preference for "speculative analysis (that) problematizes the individual as a system."<sup>484</sup> For the interpretation according to the relational frame, I will stay close to speculative analysis which allows me to make conjectures about the individual as a system. The problem with the individual, defined as a system "where that system can be understood to be sexual, psychological, interpersonal, emotional, or technological"<sup>485</sup> is that when applied to characters in literary works, it still does not escape from the determination by the system whose "power [...] remains fully assumed."<sup>486</sup> This is why in the analysis, I am not going to discuss the characters in the novel and the narrator-focalizers as individuals but am going to investigate their sense of self.

The problem of how to approach characters in post-postmodern novels has been thoroughly investigated and described by Nicoline Timmer in *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* from 2010. Timmer is trying to find a way to describe how it feels to be a self on the example of characters in the novels of David Foster Wallace, Mark Danielewski and Dave Eggers. She is examining the sense of self that emerges from these novels "(a)fter all the postmodern dust has settled."<sup>487</sup> In describing this sense of self, she needs to find a theoretical approach for the description of characters in fiction that does not reduce them to the dichotomy "people or words".<sup>488</sup> Characters seen as people were unproblematically approached as reflections of the authors' psychology in what

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<sup>484</sup> Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis," 195

<sup>485</sup> Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis," 195.

<sup>486</sup> Anderson, "Therapeutic Criticism," 322.

<sup>487</sup> Nicoline Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 22.

<sup>488</sup> Rimmon Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London [etc.]: Methuen, 1983), 31. Quoted in Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 66.

Timmer calls psychological criticism and what she relates to the incorporation of “the psychoanalytic ideas of Jung, Freud and Bachelard”<sup>489</sup> into literary criticism. This approach has however soon become discredited by the structuralist approaches that talked about the character “as ‘actant’, as a functional part of narratives, situated at the level of action (or plot).”<sup>490</sup> The characters thus become reduced to “mere text or ‘paper beings’”.<sup>491</sup> Timmer declares this to be a false dichotomy and decides to approach characters as narrative selves, where “it is not ‘the self’, but the experiences that are related; the ‘self’ is derived from experiences and not the other way around.”<sup>492</sup> This is a point at which I want to follow Timmer’s conception and to approach all the instances whose interaction I want to interpret, namely, the characters and the narrator-focalizers as selves defined by the experiences, perceptions and relationships they have.

Timmer mentions two characteristics of this approach that are useful for interpretation of *Wij zijn licht* according to the relational frame. Firstly, it is the “focus on the level of ‘actual’ experiences, on how things are like, or *feel like*, for the self – and taking an empathic stance is important in this respect.”<sup>493</sup> Here, Timmer’s proposed way of reading overlaps with the characteristics of reparative reading. Secondly, the view of self within narrative psychology is a “*neutral* method for investigating and describing phenomenology”,<sup>494</sup> Timmer claims. The relational frame must make a shift away from Ashtor’s definition of the term individual that is meaningful in the realm of speculative criticism to the concept of self as narrative and as relational, that is “intelligible only ‘within ongoing relationships’”.<sup>495</sup> This shift functions as a connection between Timmer’s theory of the self and Ashtor’s speculative reading, a way to contextualize Sedgwick’s legacy of reparative reading. Following Timmer’s positioning, I will focus on how the form of kaleidoscopic narration and focalization presents the characters’ and narrator-focalizers’ sense of self in attempts to communicate how it feels to be them. I am therefore going to be concerned with the shapes that the self is given by the relations expressed through the narrative form. Timmer’s approach coincides with the relational frame, in which

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<sup>489</sup> Susanna Onega, “Structuralism and Narrative Poetics“, *Literary theory and criticism*, 259-279, 273-4. Quoted in Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 54.

<sup>490</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 62.

<sup>491</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 66. Timmer refers to a conception of characters that Mieke Bal used in the title of one of her first books, namely *Mensen van papier: over personages in de literatuur*. (Paper People: On Characters in Literature).

<sup>492</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 85.

<sup>493</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 86.

<sup>494</sup> Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 86. Emphasis is original.

<sup>495</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen, *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 185. Quoted in Timmer, *Do You Feel It Too?* 337.

reparative reading is an important factor, in two important respects, namely, in the phenomenological focus on the (affective) experiences of the selves (narrator-focalizers and characters) and in the empathic attitude to their experiences.

If we therefore think of the narrator-focalizers and characters as selves, this allows us to explore their sense of self as plural, relational and in-the-making because of all the affective aspects that play a role in that. The focus on how the characters and narrator-focalizers themselves present their sense of self helps us notice how their sense of self is influenced by relations and affects. This is necessary because the affective saturation of form is manifested by rather literal means in *Wij zijn licht*. The example of the socks that relate the scene where Melodie is being interrogated in a last attempt of the researchers to find out whether they can make a case for criminal negligence in their investigation of Elizabeth's death, has already been used to point to the relationality and its positive affective charge of the narrator-focalizers's relation to the characters. The voice of the focalizing socks colours the reader's perception of the scene. There is however no other way that the socks can narrate or focalize but with partiality towards Melodie. This is how literal relationism gets in *Wij zijn licht*. The socks have been hand-made by Melodie's mother Hansje with whom Melodie has a close relationship, illustrated by her faithfulness in visiting the demented senior daily in the home for the elderly:

Melodie's feet are a bit sweaty, probably because she is nervous and we hope that it comforts her that we envelop her feet, with all the softness and warmth and love that her mother has placed in us when she made us.<sup>496</sup>

The socks therefore literally cannot report on things differently or with any other tone and cannot relate to Melodie in any other way than lovingly and caringly, because these characteristics have been infused by Hansje into the stitches that form their fabric. The object that narrates and focalizes is therefore saturated not only with the utilitarian value for which it has been made by people, but also with the affective value.<sup>497</sup> The socks are speaking in Hansje's voice, telling Melodie the things that her mother would say.

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<sup>496</sup> "De voeten van Melodie zijn een beetje zweterig, vast omdat ze nerveus is, en we hopen dat het haar geruststelt hoe wij haar voeten omhullen, met alle zachtheid en warmte en liefde die haar moeder in ons heeft gestopt toen ze ons maakte." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 160.

<sup>497</sup> There are other narrator-focalizers who also reflect on the affective aspects of their production process, such as daily bread that focalizes in chapter 3: "En het respect dat we genoten: verdwenen, als sneeuw voor de zon. Ongezond heten we nu, en onnatuurlijk. Liefdeloos, alleen maar omdat we in een fabriek worden gemaakt." (Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 25.) That is: "And the respect that we used to enjoy: gone, like snow under the sun. Unhealthy, that's what we are called now, and unnatural. Made without love, just because we come from a factory."

The empathic and phenomenological strands of interpretation according to the relational frame come to the fore here because the affective experience of the socks is taken seriously and literally, although the last sentence that I have just written might prompt raised eyebrows and laughter. This is the risk that has to be engaged with in order to read reparatively; it involves switching off the “alertness and vigilance”<sup>498</sup> by means of which Felski characterizes critique and turning on a trusting and expectant attitude that is willing to engage in seeming silliness in the hope that it will allow for a chance to be positively surprised by the meanings that can be produced. This is one of the effects of reparative reading, in Sedgwick’s words, “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise.”<sup>499</sup> In their relation of Melodie’s interrogation, the socks include the relation that they have to Melodie, but also to Hansje. By these means they give the reader an insight into the relationship that Melodie and Hansje have. By following this thread of how Melodie’s sense of self is being presented via other focalizers who also share other types of insight into Melodie’s inner life, we will find out more about the relationships that influence these senses of self. Thus, the interpretation of *Wij zijn licht* according to the relational frame will produce reparatively structured knowledge about Melodie’s sense of self.

The interpretation according to the relational frame that pays attention to the fact that the form is affectively charged can also provide an insight into the psychology of the characters. For that, we need to pay attention to another narrator-focalizer who also explicitly explains their bias towards the character by referring to a saturation with human affect. It is Melodie’s cello that gives the reader an insight into Melodie’s youth, her study of music and her character. The cello reflects, just like the socks, on being made in order to express human emotion and therefore, in a sense, also housing these emotions. Talking about Melodie’s hands, the cello observes: “But as soon as they took hold of us, we felt in her being something that was older than us, a vulnerability, a desire, something that is inherent to people that once made them build cellos.”<sup>500</sup> Here, the cello is referred to in general terms again, the use of plural suggests a generic reference to cellos as a type of musical instrument which has been built in order to express affect, to translate inner feelings into tones. Because the cello as an instrument is affectively saturated, it feels a connection with Melodie and because they are on the same wavelength, it portrays her

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<sup>498</sup> Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 33.

<sup>499</sup> Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.

<sup>500</sup> “Maar zodra ze ons vastpakten voelden we in haar wezen iets wat ouder was dan wij, een kwetsbaarheid, een verlangen, datgene wat in mensen zit, waardoor ze ooit cello’s zijn gaan bouwen.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 95.

subsequent struggles that followed this magical moment of first contact between them with empathy and understanding.

The cello relates how Melodie fared in her musical studies and in her career and discloses her character flaws and personal quirks that made her life with cello a failure:

Melodie who said to her classmates that she played for the music and not for success but in the meantime studied herself stupid for a pat on the back from her cello teacher. [...] Melodie who thought that it should not be about being the best, but who at the same time also always wanted to be better than everyone else. Melodie during her final exams. She did not play poorly, if you knew that an hour ago her hands shook so badly that she was hardly able to push her valium pills out of the package. [...] But the love that she put into her play was real and this is how she, as always regained our sympathies and also those of the more human types in the exam commission [...].<sup>501</sup>

Based on the portrait of Melodie that the cello sketches, we can conclude that her ideals (“Melodie who wanted to believe in something higher, something more beautiful, something better”<sup>502</sup>) did not fare well in confrontation with a world that expected her to perform, to deliver on her talent and that valued her based on her performance. The pressure that she felt is not represented only by the teachers and examiners during her studies, but also, in the moment of their first meeting that the cello reminisces on, by her father who considers the purchase of the professional instrument for Melodie as an investment: “‘For a pound of my flesh’, said he. ‘Alright then. But I am assuming that this investment will return to me in the form of diligence during your studies, young lady.’”<sup>503</sup> Following the relation of the cello we are thus given an insight into Melodie’s psyche and its formative moments. The last quotation where the figure of her father appears however brings us to a new type of insight. So far, we have followed influences on Melodie that had to do with individual factors influencing her sense of self and

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<sup>501</sup> “Melodie die tegen haar klasgenoten zei dat ze speelde voor de muziek en niet voor het succes, maar die zichzelf ondertussen suf studeerde voor een schouderklopje van haar celloleraar. [...] Melodie die vond dat het er niet om zou moeten gaan de beste te zijn, maar die intussen toch altijd beter wilde zijn dan alle anderen. Melodie tijdens haar eindexamen. Ze speelde niet slecht, als je wist dat haar handen een uur van tevoren nog zo trilden dat ze amper in staat was haar valiumpillen uit het stripje te drukken. [...] Maar de liefde die ze in haar spel legde was echt en daarmee herwon ze zoals altijd onze sympathie, en ook die van de menselijke types in de beoordelingscommissie [...].” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 99.

<sup>502</sup> “Melodie die in iets hogers wilde geloven, iets mooiers, iets beters [...].” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 98.

<sup>503</sup> “Een rib uit mijn lijf,” zei hij. ‘Nou vooruit. Maar dan ga ik er wel van uit dat deze investering zich gaat terugbetalen in jouw studiehouding, jongedame.’ Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 97.

who she has become. In this way, we have remained on the nature side of the nature-nurture divide. Now we will follow the family dynamic, the nurture, that has also influenced Melodie.

The sibling group conversation De Hellinkjes on Whatsapp in chapter 14, reveals the family dynamic by making it clear that Melodie's other siblings, Anja, Maarten and Johan considered Melodie the apple of their father's eye:<sup>504</sup>

Johan: Because according to her Dad was much more easygoing with me and Maarten

Anja: Well

Maarte: What

Anja: Well, it's not like it was completely fair

Anja: You guys never had to do anything at home

Maarten: Duh. Ok, but that's how it went back then

[...]

Maarten: In my view, she also never had to do anything

Maarten: She was studying aaall the time.

Anja: Right

Maarten: If there was anyone who was preferred by Dad, it was her.<sup>505</sup>

The relationship with her father who has perhaps projected his own musical ambitions on her is another factor that might have heightened the pressure of expectations that Melodie felt. This might also explain why she later got into an intense conflict with him about the care for their demented mother, which her siblings criticize her for in the app.

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<sup>504</sup> My conclusion about the function of this chapter differs from Dirk Vandenberghe's who assumes a critical stance because according to him it seems to be "toch eerder een tussendoortje om al het voorgaande even snel samen te vatten" (Vandenberghe, "Cirkelen boven goed en kwaad", <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/cirkelen-boven-goed-en-kwaad-wij-zijn-licht-het-romandebuut-van-gerda-blees>). That is: "Rather an intermezzo that quickly sums up all that preceded."

<sup>505</sup> "Johan: Want pap was volgens haar veel makkelijker naar mij en Maarten

Anja: Tja

Maarten: Wat

Anja: Tja echt eerlijk was het natuurlijk niet

Anja: Jullie hoefden nooit iets te doen in huis

Maarten: Joh. Ok maar dat was toch ook een beetje de tijd

[...]

Maarten: Volgens mij hoefde zij ook nooit iets te doen

Maarten: Zij moest toch altijd studeeren

Anja: Oja

Maarten: Als er iemand voorgetrokken werd door pap was zij het wel." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 118-119.

The form of the interaction and the way that the relations of the siblings are expressed is influenced by the medium of Whatsapp. The form records even the typical and well known (to everyone who has ever used the app) miscommunications caused by the time lapse that occurs when more participants are writing simultaneously or by delay in reactions:

Anja: Right guys [...] I just thought that one of us could perhaps keep in touch with Dad about this?

Maarten: I can do that

Anja: Johan?

Johan: Okay, I would have done it anyway

Anja: Oh, sorry Maarten, I had not seen your message. So, who's going to keep in touch?<sup>506</sup>

Chapter 14 which is focalized and narrated by the sibling WhatsApp conversation offers insight into the family in which Melodie grew up, that has had an impact on who she has later become. The family dynamics, especially the potentially unmet expectations of her father are another factor that has formed Melodie's sense of self.

Knowing from Whatsapp that Melodie has managed to alienate her siblings and father, it is not surprising that we see her focusing her love and care on the only remaining family member who accepted her as she was, without her having to perform, namely her mother. Based on the insights into the relationship between Hansje and Melodie from the socks saturated with the emotion of Hansje and the insight from the cello and Whatsapp telling us about Melodie's psyche and her nurture, we can therefore conclude that Hansje was the only person that ever made Melodie feel like she is unconditionally accepted and loved: "Her mother who would have said to Melodie, in moments like these, that the nerves are really not necessary because she's alright as she is [...]."<sup>507</sup> This interpretation can furthermore provide an explanation for the reason why Melodie continued visiting her demented mother every day and why she got into a conflict with her father over whether Hansje suffers from dementia or not. The reason why Melodie continued to drag herself and her malnourished housemates to the home of her

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<sup>506</sup> "Anja: Oké jongens [...] ik dacht alleen nog dat een van ons misschien contact kan houden met pap hierover?"

Maarten: Kan ik wel doen

Anja: Johan?

Johan: Is goed, zou ik sowieso al doen

Anja: Oh sorry Maarten zag jouw berichtje niet. Dus wie houdt contact?" Blee, *Wij zijn licht*, 126.

<sup>507</sup> "Haar moeder die op momenten als deze tegen Melodie zou zeggen dat die zenuwen echt nergens voor nodig zijn, omdat ze goed is zoals ze is [...]." Blee, *Wij zijn licht*, 160-161.

mother everyday (which has eventually contributed to the exhaustion of Elizabeth's organism and led to her death) is her gratefulness for the unconditional love that she has experienced from her mother. Moreover, it is possible that Melodie held onto the belief that her mother is not demented because she could not live in a world where the only person from whom she had experienced unconditional love, was no longer herself or not all there.

The preceding commentary on the novelistic text interpreted the affective saturation of form as one of the effects of the textual signal kaleidoscopic perception when it is being read through the relational frame. This has led to an elucidation of the affective layers of the characters' psychological constitution and to a characterization of Melodie's sense of self as defined by relationism. Throughout the various steps of the interpretive process by means of which this insight has been gathered, the relational frame has used reparative reading in the interests of speculative analysis. In the process, the narrator-focalizers have been revealed to be narrative selves indeed (as defined by Timmer's theory). They can be seen as an aggregate of the narratively organized senses of self with an emphasis on the affective aspects. The narrator-focalizers relate the relationships they have with the characters and that the characters have with each other and that in their totality create a sense of self.

In the relational frame, the character is approached as a relational self that cannot be fully grasped by referring to the systems that influence and form their identity and affects. There is something unique and individual in the way that Melodie reacts to the circumstances that determined and influenced her life. This is what the interpretation according to the relational frame focuses on: mapping various types of influences on the character's sense of self. This is done in spite of the fact that the novel sometimes also contains passages that place the characters into a determining relationship with the systems that influenced them: "Melodie who wanted to believe in something higher, something more beautiful, something better and that in the godless eighties when the universe of most young people was wiped completely clean of such notions."<sup>508</sup> An extrapolation of the descriptions of systemic aspects from the text, in other words, sketching the social, economical and cultural climate and unleashing an ideological critique on it would take us only so far in an attempt at understanding Melodie as an individual. The various narrator-focalizers present her as a system consisting of contradictions, good intentions, ideals, discrepancies, traumas and affects, held together by a self-image that she,

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<sup>508</sup> "Melodie die in iets hogers wilde geloven, iets mooiers, iets beters, en dat in die goddeloze jaren tachtig, toen het universum van de meeste jonge mensen compleet luchtledig was." Blee, *Wij zijn licht*, 98.



like everyone else, must constantly edit and retouch in order for it to hold water in the continually evolving circumstances of her life.<sup>509</sup>

In this way, the relational frame works out in greater detail the sketch of how the form is one of the aspects contributing to relationism described in an earlier definition of relationism by Olnon and Van Dijk: “These texts go a step further and explore the possibilities and limits of the construction of an individual (or subject) in the middle of and especially *through* others.”<sup>510</sup> The process characterizing the relationist understanding of a sense of self is thematized through the narrator-focalizers of *Wij zijn licht*. The kaleidoscopic perception of *Wij zijn licht* makes it clear “that identity exists only by virtue of the relationships to people, animals and things around us anyway.”<sup>511</sup> My interpretation of the formal aspects with regard to the question of identity is only possible because the position from which I approach the issue, is reparative. The personifications of the focalizing objects, phenomena and collectives have to be taken seriously, almost literally, for the interpret to be able to engage with the idea that objects of daily use can be imbued with affect which they can transfer and that this affective value is given to them by people. Furthermore, the attempt to interpret Melodie’s sense of self as a multi-layered system of various influences, rather than seeing her as an individual governed and defined by a system outside of her is also an aspect of reparative reading, as is made clear by Ashtor’s contextualization of Sedgwick’s thought referred to especially in Chapter 1 debate 2.

If the narrator-focalizers relate to these specific characters in the warm, accepting and caring way that we have demonstrated above and if the use of the plural form of first-person narration means that this attitude is illustrative of the relation of all cigarettes, slowjuicers and pens to all people, then by extension, this could be true about all objects and all people. The understanding, empathy, love and care with which the objects, abstracta and collectives relate to people at the same time does not prevent them from telling or showing the truth about them, even when it uncovers the darkest and least presentable aspects of their character. This manner of relating

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<sup>509</sup> This negotiation between the circumstances and self-image that occurs in all three members of the commune as a consequence of the arrestation is described by focalizer in chapter 23, cognitive dissonance: “Wij zijn de grimas die dan even over uw gezicht trekt [...] tot u een verhaal weet te verzinnen waarin u de feiten, of uw eigen verhouding daartoe, zo verdraait dat alles weer lijkt te kloppen.” (Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 198).

We are the grimace that then runs across your face [...] until you have been able to come up with a story in which you twist the facts or your own relationship to them in such a way that everything seems to make sense again.

<sup>510</sup> “Deze teksten gaan een stap verder en verkennen de mogelijkheden en beperkingen van de constructie van het individu (of subject) te midden van, en vooral ook *door* anderen.” Olnon en Van Dijk, “Radicaal relationisme”.

<sup>511</sup> “Dat identiteit überhaupt bestaat bij de gratie van de relaties tot de mensen, dieren en dingen om ons heen.” Olnon and Van Dijk, “Radicaal relationisme”.

that we see in the narrator-focalizers towards the characters stands in sharp contrast to how relations and communication are shown to be between the characters themselves. It is as if the collectivity of the relating objects and phenomena was the only collectivity that remains possible or thinkable in contrast to a collectivity among humans. The fictional world of *Wij zijn licht* is a world where any cohesion and solidarity seems to be banished from human relationships.

Neither among the commune members, nor in the other collective that we get to experience through the pages of the novel, the team of investigators composed of Liesbeth, Ton and Asif, is there healthy, honest and authentic communication. We do not get to witness people having relationships without conflict or manipulation. In the case of the commune, the communication between members often results either in dominance (towards Elisabeth), manipulation (of Muriël) or conflict and furious outbursts (in Petrus). The way in which Melodie communicated with Elisabeth resulted in her taciturnity, to such an extent that the forensic pathologist finds out that the muscles around her vocal chords are extremely weak and atrophied. The reason for that is “that Elisabeth could not say or do anything in the last couple years without being contradicted or corrected.”<sup>512</sup> When Muriël attempts to set her boundaries about what she needs to eat and when she feels hungry upon their return from the police station, Melodie uses manipulation and distraction. The result is Melodie’s ignorance of Muriël’s reasonable suggestion to drink vegetable juice and ultimately boils down to a limitation of her autonomy:

‘That’s because I am a little bit hungry, I think. Perhaps I could make a vegetable juice for us? [...]

‘It’s alright, Muriël. You’ll find all the emotions a little bit higher if you do not distract yourself with eating. [...]

‘Yes, you must also be hungry. I will look in the kitchen if – ‘

‘That’s really nice of you, but that’s not what I mean. I meant rather that I am very close to what I feel, if you catch my meaning. But I don’t have to necessarily anesthetize myself with food.’<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> “Dat Elisabeth de laatste jaren nooit meer iets kon zeggen of doen zonder te worden tegengesproken of gecorrigeerd.” Blee, *Wij zijn licht*, 114.

<sup>513</sup> “Het komt, denk ik ook doordat ik een beetje honger heb. Misschien kan ik wat groentesap voor ons maken?” [...]

‘Het geeft niet, Muriël. De emoties zitten allemaal wat hoger als je jezelf niet afleidt met eten. [...]

‘Ja, jij zal ook wel honger hebben. Ik zal even kijken in de keuken of -‘

‘Dat is heel lief van je, maar dit is niet wat ik bedoelde. Ik bedoelde juist dat ik heel dicht bij mijn gevoel sta, voor mijn gevoel. Maar ik hoef dat niet zo nodig met voedsel te verdoven.’” Blee, *Wij zijn licht*, 210.

This is how Melodie limits others' freedom and controls their worldview with a light touch. Among her other frequently shown communication strategies is asking her housemates how they feel and when they are silent, attempting to guess their feelings, interpreting their silence and speaking for them. When they express something that does not accord with her expectations, values or goals, she patronizes them or uses her authority as the self-appointed therapist of the group to lead them 'towards the light'. Despite the name of the commune "Sound and Love"<sup>514</sup>, their cohabitation and interaction leads to the following observation expressed by the "crime scene"<sup>515</sup>, the house where they live: "We suspect that the inhabitants of commune Sound and Love have imprisoned each other in a cage of loneliness."<sup>516</sup>

The communication of the investigators within the police force does not go much smoother. The relationships are not as close, personal or intense as in the commune which takes away some of the tension but even a collegial interaction does not result in mutual understanding, seeing each other for who the colleagues are or pleasant cooperation. Liesbeth, made irritable by troubles at home with her anorectic daughter, makes inappropriate, stereotyping jokes directed towards Asif:

'[...] first off, I am going for a smoke. Would you like to come with? Or does your faith not allow it?'

'I find that to be a stereotyping question, if you don't mind my saying so. I make my own choices and I have chosen to keep my lungs healthy. You could do the same. Or does that not go with *your* creed? (emphasis added)<sup>517</sup>

Liesbeth's and Asif's relationship seems to sustain the joke without much injury, they are later seen cooperating peacefully and effectively with each other when they have a clearly defined professional goal (the interrogation of the commune members). The underlying tensions however come to the surface towards the end of the novel. This is caused by dysfunctional communication again and a lack of care for and interest in each other as individuals that characterizes the relationships between the colleagues.

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<sup>514</sup> "Klank en Liefde." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 68.

<sup>515</sup> "Plaats delict." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 14.

<sup>516</sup> "Wij verdenken de bewoners van woongroep Klank en Liefde ervan dat ze elkaar gevangen hebben gehouden in een kooi van eenzaamheid." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 23.

<sup>517</sup> '[...] ik ga eerst nog even een sigaretje roken. Wil jij ook? Of mag dat niet van je geloof?'

'Dat vind ik nogal een stereotyperende vraag, als ik het mag zeggen. Ik maak mijn eigen keuzes en ik kies ervoor om mijn longen gezond te houden. Zou jij ook kunnen doen. Of mag dat niet van jouw geloof?'" Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 55.

Towards the end of a work meeting about the preliminary conclusions of Liesbeth and Asif's investigation and interrogation, Ton, their boss, makes a remark that makes Liesbeth boil over:

'Jeez... What a case. A bunch of anorexics.'

'Okay, Ton,' says Liesbeth. She pushes her chair back and grabs her copy of our text from the table. Her half-empty cup of coffee topples and the contents spill over the table, on Asif's trousers and Liesbeth walks out of the door.

'Huh,' says Ton. 'Liesbeth?'

Asif shakes his head. 'Well done, Ton, really.' [...]

'You could have used a bit more tact, you know. She's already dealing with a lot with her daughter. Why do you think this case has been so important to her?'

'Her daughter? What's going on with her? [...]

'This is unbelievable. How long have you and your Lies been working together, did you say? Go ask her than, what's going on with her daughter. And he calls himself a colleague.'<sup>518</sup>

All attempts at contact and relating to each other that these characters make by means of language are negatively influenced and sullied by not acknowledging and understanding the underlying motivations and feelings of others and result in misunderstanding and disregard of each other as unique individuals of inherent unalienable value. It is as if the most important formal choice made in this novel, the choice for the objects, phenomena and mental processes to function as narrator-focalizers is saying that there is no hope for humans to relate to each other in a loving and caring way by means of language. The attempts at communication of all the characters in the novel illustrate the traps that human communication and interaction regularly, and, perhaps inevitably, tumbles into and succumbs under.

The affective saturation of the form through the narrator-focalizers however also suggests that even if we do not experience collectivity, care and being seen in the relationships with other

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<sup>518</sup> "'Sjongjongejonge. Wat een zaak. Stelletje anorexialijers.'

'Oké, Ton,' zegt Liesbeth. Ze schuift haar stoel naar achter en grist haar exemplaar van onze tekst van tafel. Haar nog halfvolle koffiebekertje valt om en de inhoud stroomt over de tafel, op de broek van Asif, en Liesbeth loopt de kamer uit.

'Hé,' zegt Ton. 'Liesbeth?'

Asif schudt zijn hoofd. 'Lekker bezig hoor, Ton.' [...]

'Het kan iets tactischer, hé. Ze heeft het al zo zwaar met haar dochter. Waarom denk je dat deze zaak zo belangrijk voor haar is?'

'Haar dochter? Wat is daar dan mee?' [...]

'Ongelofelijk dit. Hoelang werken jij en "Lies" al samen zei je? Ga dat maar aan haar vragen, wat er met haar dochter is. Dat noemt zich collega.'" Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 182.

humans, the whole world is affectively charged. From the daily bread that says: “As if people with white hair nets working at an assembly line should not be capable of a labour of love.”<sup>519</sup> to the slowjuicer that calls itself “the supporter and comforter of Muriël,”<sup>520</sup> all objects are serving people’s physical, affective or psychological needs and claim to be thrilled to do that. Some of them, such as the cello, even state that this is the sole purpose for which they were made. In this way, the novel acknowledges the difficulty that accompanies its goal – to represent affect and relations – in a medium that relies on language. The form of kaleidoscopic perception and its effect of affective saturation is a possible way by means of which this difficulty can be addressed. I have claimed above that the effect of the formal device of kaleidoscopic narration can be seen as a commentary on the problem of solidarity and social cohesion, which would make this aspect of the interpretation into a commentary on the relationship text – world and would thus make the consideration of issues of social commitment of literature relevant.

Earlier on, it has been stated that this proposal for a relational frame is not going to concern itself with the level of attitude to modernity, apart from a reference to the thorough work done in this area by Demeyer and Vitse. The question of how a certain frame relates to the question of social commitment of literature (*engagement* in Dutch)<sup>521</sup> can be seen as part of the level attitude to modernity (the world) that characterizes the frame. Because of the important role that reparative reading plays on the level of the attitude to literature, the relational frame does not go for systems- or ideology critique. It however does not mean that it would not relate to the world or to modernity at all. The focus on the aspect of commitment of literature is a way in which the relationship of the text to the world can be described within the relational frame. I am picking up on the autonomy and engagement debate because it has been a significant and at times rather heated debate in the Dutch literary critique that dominated the field after the idea of the end of postmodernism took root. In the last section of this chapter I want to relate the concept and demonstrate the use of the relational frame to this specifically Dutch debate.

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<sup>519</sup> “Alsof mensen met witte haarnetjes aan een lopende band geen liefde zouden kunnen stoppen in hun werk.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 25.

<sup>520</sup> “De steun en toeverlaat van Muriël.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 207.

<sup>521</sup> When using this phrase “autonomy and engagement”, I am going to use the English equivalent engagement (which means something else) for the Dutch word “engagement”. English lacks a one-word equivalent that would express all the aspects that the Dutch word “engagement” covers in the literary-critical discourse. When the Dutch word engagement is used outside of the phrase “autonomy and engagement”, I will use the English equivalents “commitment” or “social relevance of literature”.

#### 4.4.1 Interpretation according to the relational frame with regard to commitment of literature

So far, the analysis according to the relational frame has made much of the relationality of the narrator-focalizers. So far also, I have analysed several intensely relational instances that come close to the characters, such as the socks, cello or bread. Now, I want to focus on one of the narrator-focalizers whose relation to a character is more neutral and superficial. I am also going to focus more on the consequences of the interpretation of kaleidoscopic perception for the idea of commitment of literature as seen through the relational frame. One of the more neutral narrator-focalizers in *Wij zijn licht* is 'light' that relates the last chapter. 'Light' starts out being affectively concerned about the state it discovers Muriël in as it takes up the narration. It does question the relationship that it has with Muriël in the following quotation: "We are not the type of phenomenon that would doubt itself quickly but now that Muriël starts crying, we are asking ourselves whether it's because of us, whether she is disappointed in us because she really thought she could live only on us."<sup>522</sup> Initially, it seems to matter to light, how Muriël feels about it. In the rest of the chapter, light however restricts its relation purely to what can be perceived by sight and refrains from further description of the mutual relation between it and Muriël. It only describes what is visible – from the scene and the actions of the characters, refusing to speculate about their thoughts or experiences.

Light describes Muriël's attempt to leave Melodie's house in the early morning of the day following her, Melodie's and Petrus' return from the police station. It describes her despairing and unhappy "female face with traces of tears on the cheeks",<sup>523</sup> her reactions to the tossing and turning of her sleeping housemates as she leaves and her fight with the wind chime: "standing on the balls of her toes, she just manages to make one motion by which she wraps the scarf around the jingles so that the sound that this makes is immediately muffled."<sup>524</sup> The limitation of the focalizer's perception to sight in this chapter leaves the reader guessing about Muriël's interiority. Based on earlier chapters narrated by focalizers such as cognitive dissonance, doubt or pen who did provide access to Muriël's interiority, the reader can imagine the "doubt and struggle"<sup>525</sup> that she is going through towards the end of the novel. When she finds out that the front door is locked, she has a breakdown in the hallway. Tormented by her doubts about

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<sup>522</sup> "Wij zijn niet het type verschijnsel dat snel aan zichzelf twijfelt, maar nu Muriël begint te huilen, vragen we ons wel af of dat door ons komt, of ze teleurgesteld is in ons, omdat ze werkelijk dacht dat ze van ons zou kunnen leven." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 216.

<sup>523</sup> "Vrouwengezicht met sporen van tranen op de wangen." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 222.

<sup>524</sup> "Op haar tenen lukt het haar net om met de sjaal de klankstaven in één beweging bij elkaar te drukken zodat het geluid dat ontstaat onmiddellijk wordt gedempt." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 220.

<sup>525</sup> "Haar tweestrijd." Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 222.

leaving the commune, unused to making decisions for herself after several years in the commune that was all about ‘us’, too fearful of waking her housemates to go back “into the living room [...] to take the keys from the hook”<sup>526</sup>, still shocked by the death of her housemate and the arrestation, the light perceives Muriël trapped in misery and indecision.

It is here, that light abandons its previously relational attitude towards Muriel and begins to emphasize their neutrality and their disengagement from the way they perceive the scene:

And it does not matter to us what will happen from now on. Whether she will go back into the living room to get the keys from the hook and then back to the hallway to leave the house through the front door or whether she will leave the house through the garden door and climb over the fence [...] or whether she will stand still here, in doubt, until morning comes or whether she will decide to stay. [...] You will not hear us express a preference.<sup>527</sup>

The explicit and evident disinvolvement of the narrator-focalizer can be seen as making place here for someone else to do the relating that has been such an integral part of the kaleidoscopic perception and such an important aspect that the interpretation according to the relational frame has paid attention to. In the postmodernist frame, the reader “is offered [...] a co-creating role.”<sup>528</sup> The philosophical perspective on language underlying the attitude to modernity and literature within the postmodernist frame influences the description of the process of the assignment of meaning to texts in a specific way. Under the influence of the post-structuralist vision of language, interpretation is seen as being produced by the endless proliferation of meanings based on the linking of signifiers and signifieds to each other in endless chains of signification making up the text. The reader is an actor in this process of meaning production – their assignment of meaning to signifiers influenced by their culture, age, gender, social status and other systemic aspects plays an important role in the production of meaning within the postmodernist frame. With the reader’s role in the process of signification defined by this vision of language, the reader’s involvement has to do with an abstract, propositional meaning-making or the ability to enjoy language games. The meaning that the literary text has is not stable, but

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<sup>526</sup> “De woonkamer in [...] om de sleutels van het haakje te pakken.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 221.

<sup>527</sup> “En ons maakt het niet uit wat er nu verder zal gebeuren. Of ze terug de woonkamer in zal gaan om de sleutels van het haakje te pakken, en dan terug naar het halletje om door de voordeur te vertrekken, of dat ze vanuit de keuken via de tuindeur het huis zal verlaten en over de schutting zal klimmen [...] of dat ze hier blijft staan, in tweestrijd, tot het ochtend wordt, of dat ze zal besluiten om te blijven. [...] Ons zult u geen voorkeur horen uitspreken.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 221.

<sup>528</sup> “Krijgt [...] een meecreërende rol aangeboden.” Vaessens, *Geschiedenis*, 385.

within the postmodernist frame it is still based on the interplay between signifiers and signifieds, it is bound to language and signification.

This reference to the postmodernist frame, emphasized for example in the postmodernist reading of chapter seventeen that also explicitly addresses the reader, can be understood as a continuity of interpretation with regards to the level of the attitude to modernity in *Wij zijn licht*. The Dutch debate about the end and legacy of postmodernism has been strongly influenced by an already existing tradition of a debate about autonomy and engagement. This influence is clearly visible in Vaessens' 2009 *De revanche van de roman* (Revenge of the Novel). In this book, he describes the critical vacuum following the idea of the end of postmodernism taking hold of the minds of Dutch literary scholars. At the same time, he tries to fill the vacuum by describing a new paradigm. To contextualize the late postmodern paradigm that he comes up with, Vaessens conceives of his book as a contribution to the debate about autonomy and engagement.<sup>529</sup> He makes a case for reading novels by authors a generation older than the millennials "as completely earnest contributions to real debates about the world of today written as sincerely as possible".<sup>530</sup> Whereas in the Anglophone literary critique, the debate about the end and legacy of postmodernism was more often connected with questions around sincerity, realism and communication, in the Dutch debates, the proposals for the new paradigm replacing postmodernism as a rule do not fail to mention the aspect of commitment and the authors' position or role in the public sphere beyond their literary achievements.

One such proposal has given its name to the new frame that is being constructed in this chapter, namely relationism. Relationism can partially be seen as an answer to the debate about autonomy and engagement that the publication of *De revanche van de roman* has resurrected with new intensity. The essay "Radicaal relationisme" (Radical relationism) positions itself clearly as a contribution to the debate about autonomy and engagement because it makes a claim for the value of the work of millennial authors in terms of social commitment. The social commitment in these novels is not based on thematization of current events or social debates such as the migrant crisis in "(w)ithout a doubt socially committed novels [...], from Elvis

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<sup>529</sup> When Vaessens and Yra van Dijk later edit a volume on European writers beyond relativism, *Reconsidering the Postmodern: European Literature beyond Relativism*, a book that departs from a more periodizing premise than Vaessens' previous publication, *De revanche van de roman*. The introduction however also contains rather conspicuous traces of focus on the opposition between autonomy and engagement. See Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk, *Reconsidering the Postmodern: European Literature beyond Relativism* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

<sup>530</sup> "Als volstrekt ernstige en zo oprecht mogelijke bijdragen van schrijvers aan reële debatten over de wereld van vandaag." Vaessens *De revanche van de roman*, 16.



Peeters' unfortunately still very relevant *De ontelbaren* (2005) to Tommy Wieringa's *Dit zijn de namen* (2012)".<sup>531</sup> Olnon and Van Dijk see the "real commitment"<sup>532</sup> in contemporary literature differently: "the ability to offer to the writer and the reader new interpretations and knowledge of themselves, the other and the world by means of carefully composed language."<sup>533</sup>

In order to fully appreciate the connections between *De revanche van de roman* and the above introduced concept of relationism there is one more stop that needs to be made to fully map the development of the Dutch debate on the legacy of postmodernism in the last fifteen years. Making this stop will at the same time also help us to interpret the last sentences of *Wij zijn licht* and understand what the role that the relational frame reserves for the reader has to do with commitment. This stop is Aukje van Rooden's *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement* (Literature, Autonomy and Commitment) with the subtitle *Pleidooi voor een nieuw paradigma* (A Plea for a New Paradigm). The new paradigm that Van Rooden introduces is called relational. Van Rooden places her study into the context of the debate around autonomy and engagement by referring, among others, to *De revanche van de roman* at its beginning. The way in which she defines the new relational paradigm for the social relevance of literature, which she offers instead of the old romantic paradigm with its two connected, yet conflicting sides, autonomy and engagement, is partially and in a much less radical way taken up by the proponents of relationism who use the label to describe literature of the millennials.

Van Rooden's relational paradigm which introduces a new way of thinking about the social relevance of literature on the ontological level is influenced by French philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and can thus be seen as deconstructionist. Her new paradigm takes on some characteristics of this philosophical school, for example in going beyond the goal of most aesthetic theories of literary commitment, the intended goal of which is "still the emancipation of the autonomous subject from oppressive power structures,"<sup>534</sup> thus promising to fulfill "the

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<sup>531</sup> "(z)onder meer als 'geëngageerd' beschouwde romans [...] van Elvis Peeters' helaas nog altijd zeer actuele *De ontelbaren* (2005) tot Tommy Wieringa's *Dit zijn de namen* (2012)." Olnon and Van Dijk, "Radicaal relationisme".

<sup>532</sup> "Ware engagement." Olnon and Van Dijk, "Radicaal relationisme".

<sup>533</sup> "Het vermogen de schrijver en de lezer door middel van zorgvuldig geconstrueerde taal nieuwe interpretaties en kennis van het zelf, de ander en de wereld aan te reiken." Olnon and Van Dijk, "Radicaal relationisme".

<sup>534</sup> "Immers de emancipatie van het autonome subject van onderdrukkende machtsstructuren." Aukje van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement Pleidooi voor een nieuw paradigma* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 79.

same promise as in the Enlightenment: the promise of the autonomous subject”.<sup>535</sup> This is where both Van Rooden and Olnon and Van Dijk turn away from a traditional definition of literary commitment and its intended effect (emancipation). Van Rooden observes the same development in the literary production of the millennials, as Olnon and Van Dijk do, a shift away from the twentieth century version of engagement: “commitment is always commitment with something or someone. The value thereof should therefore also be eminently ‘extrinsic’ and inherent to the good cause that you are concerned with.”<sup>536</sup> Van Rooden sees the novels of the millennial generation as an exploration of “commitment for the sake of commitment itself”<sup>537</sup> and wants to explore its “intrinsic value.”<sup>538</sup> She substantiates this idea by referring to the thoughts of Jean-Luc Nancy about “the difference between signification (signification) and meaning (sens)”<sup>539</sup> and claims that the writing of literature is an act of embracing the latter. The way in which she writes about the “a meaningfulness that you give form and that forms you”<sup>540</sup> which is characteristic for (the writing of) literature contains an echo of relationism.

We have left the analysis of the last chapter of *Wij zijn licht* in a moment when the narrator-focalizer takes a step back from the warm and relational way of relating its perceptions of Muriël’s actions, suggesting that it is making space for someone else to do the relating. When the involved, concerned attitude of the light as a narrator-focalizer is replaced with a more distanced and neutral one, this creates space for the reader to become involved. We have discussed the role that is reserved for the reader in the postmodernist frame. The relational frame conceives of the reader’s role in the interpretive process differently. It calls on different competencies in the reader than the postmodernist ability to contribute to the openness of the text based on the joyous proliferation of its meaning. The relational frame calls for affective involvement. The last few sentences of the novel and the last words of the light as a narrator-focalizer are: “We will think nothing of what she chooses. The choice is on her, the looking is on you. All that we can do is stay with her, light her face, stroke her hands; have a care that it may be seen.”<sup>541</sup> The address to the reader plays an important role here, because apart from the

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<sup>535</sup> “Dezelfde belofte als in de Verlichting: die van het autonome subject.” Van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement*, 79.

<sup>536</sup> “Engagement is altijd engagement met iets of iemand. De waarde ervan zou dan ook bij uitstek ‘extrinsiek’ moeten zijn, gelegen in de goede zaak waarop je je betreft.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje”.

<sup>537</sup> “Engagement omwille van het engagement zelf.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje”.

<sup>538</sup> “Intrinsieke waarde.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje”.

<sup>539</sup> “Het onderscheid tussen betekenis (signification) en zin (sens).” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje”.

<sup>540</sup> “Zinvolheid die je vormt en die jou vormt.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje”.

<sup>541</sup> “Wij zullen er niets van vinden wat ze kiest. De keuze is aan haar, het kijken is aan u. Alles wat wij kunnen doen is bij haar blijven, haar gezicht verlichten, haar handen strelen; zorgen dat het wordt gezien.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 222.

first chapter (symmetrically related by night) and chapter seventeen where the address can be more meaningfully read through the postmodernist frame, there is no other place in the novel where the reader is addressed. Despite the neutrality and the lack of easily identifiable ideological message that the narrator-focalizer might have, it is still calling for a certain kind of commitment, consisting in an appeal to watch, observe and bear witness to the scene that is expressed by the second sentence of the quotation. The first sentence of this quotation that is placed at the very end of the novel turns away from the twentieth-century idea of engagement connected with its goals of emancipation or winning the audience for an ideological, political or moral idea.<sup>542</sup> Light is not trying to persuade, argue with, change the opinion of or emotionally influence its audience that it addresses. It refrains from judgment and is not going to use the rhetorical force of language to convince anyone of a certain point.

Van Rooden's suggestion for a new paradigm past the dichotomy of autonomy and engagement departs from the difference between the ontological and the ontical, which she borrows from Heidegger, in an attempt to reflect on the ontology of literature. This helps her set up a new paradigm for the social relevance of literature "in which the polemical opposition between autonomy and heteronomy is conquered."<sup>543</sup> Van Rooden pleads for looking for the social relevance of literature on the ontological, rather than on the ontical level, as the previous contributions to the debate between autonomy and commitment have done. The relevance of literature on the ontological level (concerned with the being of things), consists of it being "a connection-forming being"<sup>544</sup> that "demonstrates the ever-changefulness-of-that-which-is-own, the ever-changing being of the world."<sup>545</sup> In other words, literature can express and foster a sensitivity "for the contingency of the most quotidian, [...] the singular and pluralistic connection that is (the) world."<sup>546</sup> Van Rooden bases her thoughts about the ontology of

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<sup>542</sup> Aukje van Rooden observes a difference between the twentieth century commitment as opposed to the twenty-first century one that she sees in the novels of the authors from the millennial generation. She illustrates the difference in the following sentence: "Waar Sartre in zijn geëngageerde literatuur nog kon uitgaan van overzichtelijke morele en maatschappelijke keuzes – de oorlog was net beslecht, collaborateurs moesten worden bestraft, verzetshelden geëerd, de arbeidersklasse bevrijd –, is de sociaal-politieke situatie van de eenentwintigste eeuw complexer, vloeibaarder, meer hybride." Van Rooden, "Had ik maar een hondje." Where Sartre in his activist literature still could depart from clear moral and social choices – the war had just been won, the collaborators had to be punished, the heroes of the resistance honored, the working class be liberated – there the 21<sup>st</sup> century writer has to deal with a much more complex, liquid, more hybrid.

<sup>543</sup> "Waarin de polemische oppositie tussen autonomie en heteronomie overwonnen wordt." Van Rooden, "Had ik maar een hondje".

<sup>544</sup> "Een verbinding-leggend zijnde." Van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement*, 81.

<sup>545</sup> "De steeds-weer-andersheid-van-het-eigene toont, het steeds weer anders zijn van de wereld." Van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement*, 100.

<sup>546</sup> "Voor de contingentie van het meest alledaagse, [...] de singuliere en meervoudige verbinding die (de) wereld is." Van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie en engagement*, 101.

literature and the relational paradigm on the ideas of French postmodern philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. Within the postmodernist frame, meaning is rather the “signification”<sup>547</sup> of Nancy’s that must be established by playing a language game rather than the “meaning”<sup>548</sup> that Van Rooden sees as the basis of commitment in the millennial novels. In this respect, Olnon and Van Dijk’s suggestion for seeing the social contribution of literature in the explorative value of literary writing rather than a clearly defined extraliterary (political, social, ideological or moral aim) bears resemblance to van Rooden’s idea of commitment based on *sens*.

Let us now pose the question whether the result of the interpretation that the last chapter can produce is closer to *betekenis* (signification) or *zin* (sens). The invitation to the reader to do the relating in the narrator-focalizers’ stead can function as an appeal to participate in Nancy’s *sens* of both the story that has been told in the novel and the novel itself as a literary product. Light shows its involvement<sup>549</sup> by staying with Muriël, by continuing to do the only thing that it can do, the thing that defines its existence. This is to light the scene and to create circumstances for eyes to see. The fact that “Take care that it may be seen”<sup>550</sup> are the last words of the novel gives special significance to them: it is as if the little that light is doing, is of endless, inexpressible value. It is into partaking and sharing in the value and meaningfulness of this witnessing that the reader is invited to by the address and appellation of the light. It is remarkable that the light does not ask for or require anything more of the reader.

The last scene is in essence a non-ending, just as the whole incident with Elisabeth’s death ultimately turns out to be a banal non-incident. This indefiniteness, smallness and banality of the conclusion does not coincide with the persuasive and combative tone that one would expect of the traditional conception of engagement that Van Rooden associates with “strife, agon: [...] offering resistance to enemy regimes.”<sup>551</sup> *Wij zijn licht*, a novel about a non-incident with very slight social or public consequences and relevance culminating in a non-ending does not seem to be readable from the perspective of the agonistic fight for better tomorrows that characterizes traditional engagement. The social significance and meaning of an involvement such as the one

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<sup>547</sup> “Betekenis (signification).” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

<sup>548</sup> “Zin (sens).” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

<sup>549</sup> Instead of involvement I would have liked to use the Dutch word *betrokkenheid* here. It is particularly useful and charged here, because it suggests closeness and relation and is at the same time used in literary-critical discourse as a synonym for commitment or engagement.

<sup>550</sup> “Zorgen dat het wordt gezien.” Blees, *Wij zijn licht*, 222.

<sup>551</sup> “Strijd, agonistiek: [...] het bieden van weerstand tegen vijandige regimes.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

that the light has with Muriël and that it invites the reader to participate in has much more in common with “meaningfulness beyond signification”.<sup>552</sup> Light considers it absolutely, endlessly meaningful to illuminate Muriël’s face and hands and to create conditions for the reader to see the scene. The narrator-focalizer and alongside with them, the addressed reader thus find value in “commitment for the sake of commitment”.<sup>553</sup> Although that “is not much, perhaps rather little, frustratingly little [...] it is really essential”<sup>554</sup> for the value of literature within the relational paradigm as defined by Van Rooden. From the relational frame, the social relevance and commitment of *Wij zijn licht* can be described much better by referring to Van Rooden’s commitment rather than by means of any other conception of engagement that the Dutch debate has offered so far.

My argument has been that the commitment and social relevance in *Wij zijn licht* can be described in terms offered by Van Rooden’s description of specifically millennial commitment that is not subject to a specific and clearly identifiable extra-literary aim or cause. However, the relational frame with its focus on the self, relationality and affect leaves another option open for the text to have impact. It is possible that the appeal on the reader to take responsibility for looking at the scene of the desperate and crying Muriël might be lifted off the page of the novel at its end and might be transformed into participation in the world. Perhaps the reader might feel stirred to look for the Muriëls and Elisabeths in their surroundings and to start caring for them in one way or another so that their choice in situations like Muriël’s would not be limited to choosing between an unreliable leader of a commune who will hunger them out and their parents.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

I have decided to offer a longer, in-depth interpretation of *Wij zijn licht* and focused on the oscillation between interpretations to provide information about this formally innovative novel. The reading by means of the relational frame is able to make sense, firstly, of the formally innovative aspect of the twenty-five human and non-human narrator-focalizers. Secondly, it is able to show that the mildness, empathy and compassion that the reviewers ascribe to the author, and that they make her comment on in the interviews about the novel, is partially a textual signal (a characteristic of the narrator-focalizers) and partially a matter of a reparative readerly

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<sup>552</sup> “Zinvolheid voorbij betekenis.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

<sup>553</sup> “Engagement met engagement zelf.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

<sup>554</sup> “Is niet veel, misschien zelfs weinig, frustrerend weinig [...] het is wel essentieel.” Van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

attitude. The oscillation between various interpretations is best shown by means of the frame because as a concept attempting to resolve problems of literary historiography, the frame allows for a reading of a literary work through a flexible filter that always focuses on different parts of the literary work. The concept of a frame allows for a reading of novels through several such filters which coincides with what oscillation as a metamodernist concept is doing. The original definition of oscillation according to Van den Akker and Vermeulen also corresponds with the frames that I have identified as a continuity with earlier concepts or periods, modernism and postmodernism.

Neither the modernist nor the postmodernist frame was however able to provide a full and adequate interpretation of the textual signal used in *Wij zijn licht*, namely the kaleidoscopic perception. The metatextual element of the storyline in the narrator-focalizer position is interfering with the modernist interpretation that is attempting to reach unity and coherence. The metatextual critique that the storyline has on the form in which it is communicated, as interpreted by means of a postmodernist frame, does not lead to a complete dissolution or abandonment of the form, nor of its effects. The concept of oscillation has helped to zoom in on these shifts that are thinkable when reading contemporary literature. When the oscillating movement leads the interpretation to the construction and use of relational frame, the textual signal of kaleidoscopic perception is finally able to reveal the specific affective and relational meanings that it can yield. This meaning would be arrived at neither by means of the structuralist narratology that is too focused on abstract structures to notice the affective aspects of the narrator-focalizers' relating. Nor do the previously defined frames have tools at their disposal to make sense of the relationality of these instances and the characters. In this way I have confirmed a general claim that Van den Akker and Vermeulen are making about metamodernist cultural production on a specific example of one literary work: "we feel that the postmodern discourses have lost their critical value when it comes to understanding contemporary arts, culture, aesthetics and politics."<sup>555</sup>

By constructing the relational frame, I have attempted to resolve some of the conceptual and methodological issues with the dominant connected with periodization and structuralism. The relational frame functions as a heuristic tool for the interpretation of contemporary literature. Unlike the dominant, established by means of attention paid to the principle of foregrounding based on the text, the frame traces historically contingent (but not period-bound) conventions

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<sup>555</sup> Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 3.

of interpretation as a heuristic and a guide for the creation of new interpretations. Another difference between the relational frame and the affective dominant as introduced by Demeyer and Vitse, is more content-related. The conception of relational frame defined in this chapter accounts for the lack of attention for the aspect readerly attitude both in the affective dominant and in Vaessens' more linguistically and rationally oriented conception of frames. The attention paid to the reparative reading on the level of attitude to literature balances out the emphasis that Demeyer and Vitse have put on the level of attitude to modernity which they have thoroughly described in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* by reading of contemporary novels through the ideologically critical affective dominant.

I have described several dimensions of relationality of the narrator-focalizers: their relation (both narration and perception) is affectively charged, which contributes to the affective saturation of form. This has led me to an observation that it might be possible to view the way in which particular objects, phenomena and abstracta relate to the characters as saying something universal about the interaction of humans with human-made objects. This insight has relevance later for the relationship between the language-based artform of the novel and its attempt to represent affect. The form is namely not the only thing that is affectively saturated, the objects, such as cello or socks are too. The relational frame further affords a perspective of the self (whether that is the narrator-focalizer or a character) that bypasses the determination of the individual through the system which is characteristic of the paranoid position. It offers a perspective on the character's sense of self formed in relation to and in interaction with the narrator-focalizers and other characters. As a consequence the characters' identities are revealed to be changeable and relational, composed of layers of influences, both from the outside (nurture) but also inside (nature). This has been demonstrated through the insights that various narrator-focalizers offer into Melodie's sense of self and character. The construction of identity in the novel has a lot in common with Op de Beek and Van Dijk's definition of relationism.

Let me now come back to the relationship between an artwork consisting of language attempting to represent affect which I have mostly discussed in chapter 1, debate 3. *Wij zijn licht* also portrays the straits into which human relationships can get when we try to communicate by means of language. The relationships between people are characterized by conflict, manipulation and domination, whereas the relationships of the narrator-focalizers to characters are warm, affectionate and inclined in the humans' favour. The novel therefore on the one hand paints a rather bleak picture of the possibility that humans would be able to communicate without the above-mentioned negative aspects. On the other hand, it explores the

eventuality that a fond, loving, honest and open communication does exist. This is the way that the novel relates to the outside world – it contains social critique which is a traditional, twentieth-century characteristic of commitment in literature (among others). A species of system or ideological critique is however not the only, nor the main way in which the novel, as read through the relational frame, shows its commitment and relevance in the world. The text does open up a space for the reader, gives them a role to play towards the end of the novel where they are called on to witness Muriël's struggle in her darkest hour. The relational frame conceives of the role of the reader differently than the postmodernist frame, drawing on the ability of the reader to feel with or for the characters and the scenes painted in the novel, rather than the more abstract skill of playing language games.

*Wij zijn licht* is trying to capture in language – a tool that it has to make do with – how selves are formed in relation with objects and to capture the affective aspects of these relationships, an undertaking that has consequences for the social commitments of literature, too. A medium forced to use language, such as the novel, is perhaps not optimally suited for such an undertaking. The attempt at succeeding at this goal is perhaps what motivates the form of kaleidoscopic perception. It is an attempt at “a break with representational modes of signification for non-representational, dialogic modes”.<sup>556</sup> The move away from representation influenced by processes of signification is possibly also connected with Van Rooden's shift from “the significance with a capital S [...] that has been approached as *the* human project throughout history (emphasis added)”<sup>557</sup> to “meaningfulness that does not have to be sought or pursued, only seen and embraced.”<sup>558</sup> These are the shifts taking place in and through Gerda Bles's debut novel.

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<sup>556</sup> Scott Lash, “Difference or Sociality,” in *Towards a Theory of the Image*, ed. Jon Thompson (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1996), 114. Quoted in Timmer, 340.

<sup>557</sup> “De betekenis met een hoofdletter [...] die in de loop van de geschiedenis altijd als het project van de mens is opgevat.” Aukje van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”

<sup>558</sup> “Zinvolheid die niet gezocht of nagestreefd hoeft te worden, enkel gezien en omarmd.” Aukje van Rooden, “Had ik maar een hondje.”



## 5. Conclusion

“[...] omdat jouw huidschilfers de mijne aanraakten en het lichaam reageert. En misschien is dat de, of ten minste een, definitie van liefde, dat het lichaam reageert.”<sup>559</sup>

In the conclusion to Chapter 1, I mapped the various theoretical debates about contemporary literature and left the reader with a cliff-hanger in the form of a question: what are we gaining by orienting inquiries in the humanities away from language and towards affect? I have also expressed a hope that in the three chapters that followed, the analysis of contemporary novels might in itself be an answer to the question. Let me now, in conclusion, offer some final reflections on affect and the reading of literature that involves and engages affect, ~~both by colleagues and my own.~~

Patricia Ticineto Clough claims “that attending to the affective turn is necessary to theorizing the social.”<sup>560</sup> Under the umbrella term of ‘the social’, borrowed from Massumi, she understands the “political, economic, and cultural tendencies”<sup>561</sup> of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century among which she counts “the ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism”.<sup>562</sup> If we were to relate Clough’s idea of the contribution of affective turn to the Moyano Ariza categorization that has been used in chapter 1, then Clough’s idea would have a lot in common with the goal towards which affect is used in the approaches grouped under ‘collective affect’. Closer to home, this is definitely a goal to which the ideologically critical analysis of affect in *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* has contributed. However, in the aptly named foreword to Clough’s collection of essays, ‘What Are Affects Good For?’ Michael Hardt points out a different path by drawing on the ur-source for affect theory, the writing of Spinoza.

Because of the already mentioned monism of Spinoza, Hardt talks about affects as introducing a synthesis between body and mind, reason and passions, cause and effect. Affects are always present on both sides of these dichotomies: “Affects [...] offer a complex view of causality [...]. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our

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<sup>559</sup> “Because the particles of your skin touched mine and the body reacts. And perhaps this is *the* or at least *a* definition of love.” (emphasis added). Maartje Wortel, *Dennie is een star* (Das Mag Uitgevers: 2019), 158.

<sup>560</sup> Clough, *The Affective Turn Theorizing The Social*, 2.

<sup>561</sup> Clough, *The Affective Turn Theorizing The Social*, 1.

<sup>562</sup> Clough, *The Affective Turn Theorizing The Social*, 1.

power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers.”<sup>563</sup> By studying affect, we gain insight into the power to be affected and the power to affect. Mapping these impacts is also an aspect of theorizing the social realm that Clough talks about. The relationship between mind and body must, according to Hardt, be always thought in correspondence to each other. This means that “each time we consider the mind’s power to think, we must try to recognize how the body’s power to act corresponds to it.”<sup>564</sup> When considering affect, it is necessary to recognize its influence both on the mind/thinking and the body/acting: “The greater our power to be affected, he posits, the greater our power to act.”<sup>565</sup> Hardt’s concise and perhaps deliberately simple phrasing helps me to understand what are the stakes of this project’s turn to affect and what is its relationship to other conceptions and uses of affect.

As has already been made clear by my analyses, on the level of the literary text, I am interested in the affects of characters and in gaining insight in their psychology and the role that affect plays therein. On the level of the readerly attitude, I am, unlike Demeyer and Vitse, making use of my capacity to be affected. The openness to becoming affected as a reader, the conscious engagement with the affective response of the reader, is reflected in my proposal to add another question that reflects my exploration of how the dominant functions as a readerly attitude, namely: how does the text affect me as a reader? I propose to add this question to the one already defined by Demeyer and Vitse: “How can I feel and experience the reality (myself, the other, the past)?”<sup>566</sup> The shift from the extant affective question with its focus on reality to the more individually and relationally inflected question, is a move from the systemic level of the world to the individual level of relationship between two selves: one of them real and the other one represented and mediated by words on the page. In this shift, the systemic concerns and the need to focus on the ideology critique recedes into the background. Priorities change, because in personal relationships, it feels more urgent to empathize with the self in their individual affective plight. The affective resonance between the two selves resulting in empathy takes precedence and feels more urgent than pointing out political or systemic aspects of the problem that causes the affective reaction. This provokes the question: why does this feel more urgent?

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<sup>563</sup> Hardt, “What Are Affects Good For?” ix.

<sup>564</sup> Hardt, “What Are Affects Good For?” x.

<sup>565</sup> Hardt, “What Are Affects Good For?” x.

<sup>566</sup> “Hoe kan ik de realiteit (mezelf, de ander, het verleden) voelen en ervaren?” Demeyer and Vitse “De affectieve dominant,” 223.

Pointing out the systemic causes and social factors contributing to someone's affective state requires a rational analysis which takes time to formulate and, more importantly, does not answer - or react to - the other's affective need. It is by this stance that Demeyer and Vitse's approach is characterized. It also either draws on or brings about (hard to say, with Hardt, when affect is present on both sides of a causality) an active, agentive attitude to the observed affective questions. Demeyer and Vitse's ability to point out the failure of the system and argue for the need for its change can energize and mobilize others. In accordance with Hardt's view of affect inspired by Spinoza, the two academics are being affected by the problems and injustice in the world and are in their turn affecting the world by their activity in pointing out what they have analysed and processed cognitively. Still, this form of active response, the shifting of gears into an active mode can be seen as a form of protection against being personally confronted with and affected by the affect of the other on the individual level. It is a way of holding onto some form of agency in the face of injustice and suffering.

My approach is characterized by a response on a different level, namely a relational one where rational analysis of a problem and subsequent action come in second. By assuming an empathic stance, by feeling what the characters feel or what the novel is asking me to feel, I am engaging, allowing others' affects to affect me. Hardt's following words: "the mind's power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body's power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies"<sup>567</sup> have made me question whether the comparatively more passive, less politically engaged stance that characterizes my response to being affected and my analyses of novels is not a gesture of shirking responsibility and a rejection of the capacity to translate affect into action. However, I have come to the conclusion that my affective and empathic response to affect in literature is just as engaged and necessary as that of Demeyer and Vitse, it only occurs on a different level. In the realm of relations, I consider this a response that has priority, an ethical response, because it reacts to an affective need on the level of individual relation. It is also, drawing on Sedgwick's intervention, a form of reparation.

On the level of reality, world and in the social realm, the actionable and agentive call to arms of Demeyer and Vitse also functions as a reparation. The reparation on the personal relational level, is what my project adds to the already existing idea of reparation, and it is a reparation that is equally necessary. The development of this project has been strongly influenced by the 2020 publication of *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel*, and it is in conversation with the

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<sup>567</sup> Hardt, "What Are Affects Good For?" x.

ideologically critical approach to the affective dominant that I have formed my ideas of reparative reading. I wanted to present an alternative to ideology-critical affect. However, having now formulated the reflection on why I deem reparation important and what can be gained by engaging in reparative reading, I am pleased to realize that my dissertation and the Demeyer and Vitse's book do not necessarily stand in opposition to each other. They both contribute to reparation but do so by following different routes. In my project, reparation starts from the personal and relational level and Demeyer and Vitse are ultimately hoping to contribute to the reparation of the world. I want to conclude with the hope that, throughout my dissertation, I have consistently assumed, illustrated, and argued for the use and relevance of an empathetic, reparative position that involves the reader affectively and personally.

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## 7. 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.