

Anna Krýsová, Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in Contemporary Dutch Novels (Charles University Prague & University Leiden, diss., 2022, 186 pp.)

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Report

The dissertation seeks to develop a readerly position adapted for our times, and especially for contemporary Dutch literature. The project advances a scientifically grounded and convincingly reasoned argument for a newly developed readerly attitude. Since the “shift toward affect”, the candidate argues, Dutch novels have displayed a marked reorientation from (the unmasking of) “issues of power” to “affective concerns”. Established readerly attitudes and expectations are no longer adequately equipped to receive and interpret these shifting accents. In light of the thematic paradigm shift in contemporary Dutch prose, an adapted readerly practice is required. The project’s main concerns are distilled through the (somewhat vaguely-defined) “legacy of modernism and postmodernism”, while three contemporary scholarly debates offer a critical frame for the central arguments.

The candidate presents text analyses of *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* (2009, Nelleke Noordervliet), *Klont* (2017, M. Februari) and *Wij zijn licht* (2020, Gerda Blees). She develops these analyses within “theoretical outlines” linked to debates regarding (1) periodization, (2) “strengths and weaknesses of *critique*” and (3) “affective turn in the Humanities”. (1) Regarding the issue of periodization (for instance, the subdivision of stylistic developments into modernism, late modernism, or in this case, postmodernism), the candidate argues that continuity, rather than rupture or renewal, should stand central to accounts of literary history. The “new”, she argues, is always an altered continuation of what came before. Coherence and evolution are hence characteristic of developments in literary discourse. (2) In terms of critique (as derived from the theoretical work of Rita Felski), the candidate is especially concerned with the concept of “foregrounding” as methodology. In particular, she attends to the question of who—reader or text—determines the foregrounding process and the reading practice. (3) Finally, the candidate seeks to establish the place of affect in readerly practices, and to ascertain which concepts relating to affect may be regarded as especially useful for her framework. For this purpose, she relies on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) affect theory. Sedgwick distinguishes between “reparative reading” and “paranoid reading”, and argues that readerly positions and methods generally tend to oscillate between these approaches. Building on work by Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse (2018), the candidate argues that the affective component of Sedgwick’s two readerly positions should enjoy greater emphasis.

The three novels selected for the study (Blees, Februari and Noordervliet) are interpreted through a relational and “modernist/postmodernist” framework, shaped by the candidate’s own “practical and transferable” reading method. Thus, the project seeks to situate the researcher within a theoretical discourse shaped by literary-historical, critical, and theoretical-methodological concerns. The candidate makes a convincing case for her selection of literary texts, and sufficiently motivates her decision to summarise and comment upon the three theoretical debates she relies on in her dissertation. The research question is clearly formulated, and the structure of the dissertation allows for clear communication of the study’s findings. Given its discursive, rather than purely analytical approach, some generative questions arise from the investigation. These relate especially to the potential for extrapolation of the conclusions: can the suggested reading practice be applied beyond the selected novels, to contemporary literary corpuses not only in Dutch, but by extension also in other languages? Does the generalisation of the affective turn perhaps risk obscuring other “turns” or preoccupations in contemporary Dutch literature? May current literary practices and thematic selections also invite other reading practices? In other words, could it be that the selection of novels by Blees, Februari and Noordervliet strongly predetermine the results of the research? Finally, can similar currents, which also inspire adapted readerly approaches, be identified in contemporary poetry? Gerda Blees publishes both prose and poetry.

Regarding these and other issues, the dissertation invites further discussion. The investigative project is, after all, never complete, especially since literary production remains flexible and mutable.

I am pleased to confirm that the dissertation can, in my view, be defended without further corrections.

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.



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