



**Review: Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren,
Geschlecht und Postmoderne: Zur Auslotung eines
komplexen Verhältnisses am Beispiel des
niederländischsprachigen Romans (Göttingen:
V&R, 2014).**

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Keywords: Gender and Postmodernism: A Feminist Critique of Dutch Postmodern Writing; gender, postmodernisme; feministische kritiek op Nederlandse postmoderne literatuur

The concept of Postmodernism has been under attack. The times when literary scholars celebrated literature that is compatible with postmodernist concepts like openness, plurality and the endless circulation of contradictory meaning seem to be over. In a present that is determined by financial as well as political crises, questions about the ethical and political impact of postmodernist theory as well as of postmodernist literature are raised with new emphasis. Infinite postmodernist indifference does not seem to suit a situation in which people not only want problems to be subtly diagnosed and superbly described in their complexity, but where they actually seek constructive ways to deal with or even solve them. Postmodernism has been defined as an anti-modernist artistic strategy that reacts to the experimental writing of the modernist avant-garde by returning to narrative. Ironically, in the history of postmodernist writing a kind of 'avant-garde' postmodernist literature has developed that is itself experimental. Novels by the Dutch and Belgian authors Atte Jongstra, Charlotte Mutsaers, Peter Verhelst and Stefan Hertmans belong to this not easily accessible kind of postmodernist experimental writing. Literary criticism highly values this literature, which has entered the canon of Dutch literature, although this undermines the postmodernist idea of closing the gap between highbrow and lowbrow culture.

In her dissertation, *Geschlecht und Postmoderne: Zur Auslotung eines komplexen Verhältnisses am Beispiel des niederländischsprachigen Romans*, Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren, turns to a selection of novels by the above authors with a new perspective. By focussing on gender representations she points out a contrast between their innovation concerning literary form and their political impact, which, she argues, is not innovative at all in terms of changing traditional gender structures. In her analysis of *Het huis M* (1993) by Atte Jongstra, *Rachels Rokje* (1994) by Charlotte Mutsaers, *Tongkat* (1999) by Peter Verhelst and *Harder dan sneeuw* (2004) by Stefan Hertmans, she demonstrates how, with respect to gender representation, these novels fall short of their postmodernist agenda of fluid identities and playful dissolution of hierarchy, confirming the binary opposition of male and female as solid biological sexes instead of socially constructed genders. The critical accounts of the four

selected novels are embedded in well-informed introductions to the work of the four authors. In her methodological approach Bundschuh-Van Duikeren chooses to combine the possible worlds theory with feminist narratology. The possible worlds theory serves as a way of bringing back reality as a parameter into literary criticism, taking the reader as a reference point for judging whether something represented in a text can be labelled as realistic.

It is because of this methodological setting that Bundschuh-Van Duikeren claims not to have joined the deconstruction game of reading against the grain, which in this case would mean showing that canonical texts of Dutch Postmodernism, which are expected to have relinquished all concepts of fixed identity and stable structure, fail to give credit to their own concepts because they do not challenge gender identities and hierarchies. In her well-structured and accurate analyses she succeeds in demonstrating how the texts in question establish well-known, hierarchical gender structures instead of transforming gender identities. From women as objects that are created by male subjects in *Het Huis M* to female subjection under male dominance in *Rachels Rokje*, from multiple identities that do not touch the line of gender as an essential category in *Tongkat* to the exclusively male narrative voice in *Harder dan sneeuw*, Bundschuh-Van Duikeren provides evidence for her claim that the innovation of these novels is restricted to their form and certain ideological aspects, whilst displaying significant blind spots concerning gender representation. Of course the question remains whether the selected novels can indicate how innovative gender constructions are in Dutch postmodernist literature in general, but as all novels chosen for this study belong to the core of the postmodernist canon of Dutch literature, they do suffice to at least to signify a trend.

By applying the possible worlds theory Bundschuh-Van Duikeren seeks to stress that her analyses have political implications, that they *matter* in a world that is known to all of us, even though it cannot be pinned down in a simple way. She does not want her readings to be merely a part of endless fictional worlds that generate an endless number of contradictory readings. She explicitly justifies her choice for the possible worlds theory by criticising poststructuralist readings of postmodernist texts, which, she claims, end in a circular argument: poststructuralist theory is confirmed or even created in these literary texts, which means that poststructuralist readings only describe how these literary texts succeed in aesthetically putting these concepts into practice. Nevertheless, the results of her readings could themselves easily be deconstructed: the concept of woman as an object exposed as a stereotype in *Het Huis M*, male dominance executed by female characters in *Rachels rokje*, multiple identities crossing gender lines in Verhelst or female perspectives integrated into the narrative universe in *Harder dan sneeuw*. Bundschuh-Van Duikeren herself acknowledges that the possible worlds theory is difficult to combine with postmodernist texts that resist indicating a central world in their textual universe that could serve as a starting point to establish a hierarchy of the worlds represented. By nevertheless applying this theory to postmodernist texts Bundschuh-Van Duikeren wants to show that there is a truth-value to these texts even if they openly deny this. She refuses to take over the values of the literary texts into her literary criticism, a mistake poststructuralist views on literature are guilty of.

The question is whether the possible worlds theory is needed to make this point; whether deconstruction is really only possible as an empty game. Bundschuh-Van Duikeren is good at making her point clear, at times too clear. To stress the relevance of her own approach she tends to create strong oppositions, for example by contrasting her approach with a view on deconstruction represented by De Man or Deleuze, denying the Foucault-side of deconstruction

in which the loss of a clear link of language to reality makes the question of who is talking and why all the more important. Stressing the role of the reader in the possible worlds theory is in line with this pragmatic perspective and the study itself is the best example for a text that generates its truth-value by rhetorical devices. This confirms the optimistic attitude that the loss of reality as definite relation between text and world does not necessarily mean drifting away into meaninglessness, indifference and undecidability, but that it matters all the more what we want and what we do with texts. In the case of this study, the point could have been made even with less extreme binary oppositions: the critical accounts of the selected novels would be strong even if they admitted more openly that the gender representation in the novels cannot be clearly pigeonholed on all levels, and the result would be significant even if it did not claim a referential reading.

Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren's book is a very relevant contribution to Dutch literary studies. It shows how breaking up textual structures can still confirm traditional sociological structures, how a progressive form can transport unfair ideologies. It makes clear that the postmodernist metanarrative of no binaries, of deconstructing ideology, does not meet its own goals on all levels. It also demonstrates that self-reflexion is not only a main characteristic of postmodernist literature, but also of postmodernist literary theory. If Modernism is modernity becoming aware of itself and if in Postmodernism this self-reflection becomes self-evident, it is only logical that there has to be an ongoing self-reflection and self-critique in postmodernist theory. The intriguing quality of Bundschuh-Van Duikeren's way of engaging in Postmodernism's group therapy with itself is that it is not self-destructive. It foregrounds that self-critique, as a common standard in Postmodernism, does not necessarily lead to resigned indifference. It can be turned into a productive process that, in this case, connects literature not only to what we think – to what pleases our intellects – but also to what we want and what we do.

Author's biography

Beatrix van Dam studied Dutch, German and English Studies as well as History in Münster and Amsterdam. She teaches Dutch literature at the University of Münster. Her Ph.D. investigates how telling history combines factual and fictional narrating strategies in Dutch and German (postmodern) literature. Recent publications include (together with Lut Missinne) “‘Einen Roman, in den du alles holterdipolter reinkippst’: Louis Paul Boon, *De kapellekensbaan* (1953)’ in *Grundkurs Literatur aus Flandern und den Niederlanden*, ed. by Johanna Bundschuh-van Duikeren, Lut Missinne and Jan Konst (LIT-Verlag, 2014).