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Armando Brakman Mutsaers : over filosofie en literatuur

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SUMMARY OF

ARMANDO BRAKMAN MUTSAERS.

ON PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

This dissertation is a study of the literary work of three Dutch authors: Armando (1929), Willem Brakman (1922-2008) and Charlotte Mutsaers (1942). These authors initially appear to be very diverse. Their work has never before been studied in conjunction. Nevertheless, I show that their work has at least three aspects in common. Firstly, they address the question of the category of the aesthetic in their work. It seems that for all three authors studied here the autonomously aesthetical functioning of their oeuvres is both inevitable and impossible in a moral and political sense. They develop ways in their work to make this aporia visible. Secondly, in the cases of these three authors the critique of the aesthetic develops into a critique of the subject. The aesthetical is, after all, always connected to an experiencing subject. This has implications for an unambiguous reading of their work, as such kind of reading is also connected to the intentionality of the subject. Thirdly, a reader of the work of these three authors can again and again untangle 'strategies' that install an ontological difference. They compel readers to conceptualize their own limits metaphysically and ontologically. These authors' works affect the reader in an existential manner.

I capture the strategies, with which these authors bring about the three points that are mentioned above, in different metaphors: 'cutting' in the case of Armando, 'linking' with Brakman, and 'folding' with Mutsaers. These are descriptions of the ways in which the respective literary works provoke certain interpretations and experiences and at the same time refute them. From this postulating and negating arises the above-mentioned critical reflection on one's own subjective boundaries. In the various chapters of this disserta-

tion I will not only read volumes of poetry, novels and essays of these three Dutch authors, but also the work of philosophers like, among others, Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Gilles Deleuze. These are thinkers who were, at a philosophical level, engaged with similar problems as those which the three authors have struggled with. The ideas of those philosophers clarify at a conceptual level the problems that are outlined in a literary way in the works of Amando, Brakman and Mutsaers. My thesis is that such literary work embodies a philosophical problem, although at the same time, however, it is not reduced to it.

This dissertation consists of three parts each of which is composed of three chapters. The work of Armando is at the centre of the first part: 'Cutting: Negativity and Meaning in the Work of Armando'. I mainly focus on Armando's proposition 'there is something fishy about beauty' and will demonstrate that this is just as much a condemnation of the aesthetical, as a recognition of the literary inevitability of this category. In the second part, 'Linking: Commitment and Autonomy in the Work of Willem Brakman', Brakman's oeuvre comes up for discussion. I will demonstrate here how he struggles with the tension between the autonomy of art and the necessity to look for political commitment. It is possible to read Brakman's work as an attempt to solve the aporia that exists between these two positions. To this end art has to turn against itself and become anti-art. The third part, 'Folding: Strategic Effects in the Work of Charlotte Mutsaers', examines how her strategy of folding can be understood as an attempt to dismantle the subjective centre of literature- and art-criticism. The folds in her work are not only a way to dispossess art and the aesthetical of their human centre, but also to confront other forms of knowledge that are bound to the subject, like historiography and certain forms of philosophy, with the problematical aspects of their anthropocentrism.

The **First chapter**, concerning Armando, shows that his work is always caught in a tension between aesthetical autonomy and history. When we consider the development of this author's writing, both aspects seem to continually oppose each other with regard to the difference between the person Armando and his work. Until the end of the seventies, Armando was an author who, as a person,

actively occupied himself with his place in history (of literature and art). Additionally, he wrote autonomous, not easily accessible work. After this period, Armando increasingly withdraws as a person; he evolves into an 'autonomous' author without any affiliations. In his work, however, he deals specifically with history, especially WOII. In an analysis of the short story 'Eigenaardig', I will demonstrate that the aforementioned division between autonomy and history not only presents itself in the distinction between person and work, but persists in the work of the author as such. Following an analysis of three literary-theoretical interpretations of his work, I will postulate the hypothesis that the differences in said interpretations should be attributed to exactly that tension between the aesthetical functioning of Armando's work and the historicizing meanings that can be ascribed to it.

In the **second chapter** I will elaborate on this thesis philosophically, based on a twentieth-century attempt to lay the foundation of the autonomy of the aesthetic. Philosopher Christoph Menke postulates that this autonomy can mainly be defended by stressing the 'negativity' of the aesthetic experience. Someone who contemplates this will experience an object aesthetically when he or she adopts a process of attribution of meaning and the negation of those meanings. This calls for a manner of dealing with artworks that addresses elements in such a work which support interpretations, as well as elements that undermine such interpretation. The different interpretations from chapter 1 can thus be understood as moments in an aesthetic process. I derive from Menke two different manners of writing about this aesthetic processuality. Because the aesthetic experience is never-ending in principle, one could limit oneself to merely demonstrating a contradiction between valid interpretations. But one could also focus on the work's 'strategies' that enable an aesthetic experience. Although I use the first option in several places, it is principally this last option that plays an important role in these chapters. In the second chapter I will go into the shortcomings of Menke's aesthetics. The negativity that he attributes to the aesthetic is, in the end, too radical to be subjectively perceptible. He also links it to philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of 'virtuality'; a notion that radically withdraws itself from subjectivity. Because

Menke's aesthetics are explicitly linked to the subjective experience, this referral to virtuality encapsulates the aesthetic's delimitation or problematisation. Menke's aesthetic eventually undermines itself in a contrast between experience and ontology.

The **third chapter** demonstrates how historical meanings, aesthetical functioning and a problematisation of the aesthetic in Armando's work are connected. I will demonstrate that connection by analyzing Armando's first volume of poetry *Verzamelde Gedichten*. I will elaborate on an interpretation that mainly reads Armando's poetry in an autobiographical manner. I will demonstrate that references that are seen by some scholars as references to the author's youth can be read in various other ways. Thus, the autobiographical meaning is, at most, a 'moment' in an aesthetical process which contains many other moments. This also applies to WW II as the ultimate meaning in Armando's oeuvre; the poetry volume appears to comprise other historical references as moments as well. In this chapter, I will mainly dilate upon a specific group of signifiers that appear in the volume; words such as 'knife', 'sword' and 'cut'. These can be read as references to an autobiographically primal scene (the murder of a German soldier), but I will demonstrate that they can also be understood as undermining that scene within Armando's body of work. Besides that, they can also be deciphered as intertextual references to the book of the Bible, 'Apocalypse'. I will reason that this intertextuality in Armando's volume functions as an allegory of Menke's aesthetic of negativity. It alludes to the postulation and negation of meanings (the names of God) without getting to the core (God). In this context the word 'knife' can also be read as a poetical allusion. Armando's oeuvre actually performs the act of cutting with a knife. Again and again, his work doubts securities about part and whole. The best examples here are the many ready-mades in his oeuvre, but I will argue that his literary work as a whole is subject to fragmentation. To conclude, I will demonstrate that the Biblical intertext in *Verzamelde Gedichten* is not only a poetical metaphor; 'Apocalypse' also refers to an ontological difference: the difference between being and beings. This meaning of the Bible book thus also undermines the poetical or aesthetic meaning that can be read into it. Where the aesthetic has a link with the subject, this reading of

'Apokalyps' refers beyond that subject. God cannot be experienced by mankind. In Armando's work, there is something fishy about beauty in two ways. Beauty is indifferent towards meaning and history, but undermines itself at the same time by transgressing into something that is beyond subjectivity.

The **fourth chapter** is the first about Brakman. I will dilate upon his objections to the literary-historical positioning of his work under postmodernism and show that this accounts for a mainly specific, limited interpretation of postmodernism. I suggest that, because of this terminological indistinction, it is more productive to read Brakman's work through the art-philosophy of Adorno. In this chapter I will mainly focus on the way in which art takes part in the 'dialectic of the enlightenment', and, moreover, on the analysis the philosopher makes of an episode from the *Odysseia* of Homer. According to Adorno this represents the fact that processes of progress and emancipation will inevitably get so entangled in the aporia that they become in the end repressive themselves. Subsequently I will show on the basis of Brakman's *De sloop der dingen* how this novel represents the aporia of the dialectic of enlightenment. I will show how at the narratological levels of space, time, character and focalization emancipation and repression start to blend and become indistinguishable.

Adorno reads Homer's story about the Sirens also as an allegory about the birth of art from the dialectic of enlightenment. The **fifth chapter** shows how the autonomous domain of art and the aesthetic only becomes possible through the specific subjectivity that arises through that aporia between emancipation and repression. The subject is a liberation of the world of objects and at the same time a self-limitation. Art can be critical on one hand through its autonomy. On the other hand it is condemned to powerlessness and, moreover, as an accessory to (because it is a product of) the dialectic of enlightenment. Art remains an aesthetic pretence. I read Brakman's *Ante diluvium* as a representation of exactly this critical pretence. This novel plays off two subjective 'logics' against one another, a hegemonical logic against a critical and emancipated logic. Where the first enforces a choice between one or the other, both can coexist peacefully in the second one. I make clear how both

logics stay entangled. The novel suggests that one originates from the other, and therefore seems to follow Adorno's analysis. Subsequently, I contrast this 'emancipated' novel-logic with the concept of 'virtuality' used by the philosopher Henri Bergson. At first sight this seems a theoretical description of the emancipated logic in Brakman's novel. However, Bergson's concept withdraws itself from the subjectivity to which the interpretation of *Ante diluvium* is still bound. Brakman's novel rather suggests virtuality as something that is no longer accessible in the aesthetic experience. I expand on the difference between the aesthetic and the virtual based on the reading of Brakman; this chapter, therefore, contains an addition to the analysis of chapter 2. The aesthetic exists as a neutralisation of virtuality and ontology.

According to Adorno art has to turn itself against its own principle to escape from the aporias of the dialectics of enlightenment and the dialectics of the aesthetic appearance. It has to become anti-art. In the **sixth chapter** I explain how Brakman realizes this in his work. Here, the strategies in his work play a central role. They announce the end of the subject, of enlightenment, and aesthetics. These strategies, unlike Armando's, do not concern cutting, but a linking. In a narratological analysis of Brakman's novel *Een goede zaak*, normally well distinguished matters appear to form a jumble: different times run through each other, spaces flow into each other and it is often unclear where one character starts and the other ends. At first this linking summons an aesthetic experience, meaning that the reader gets caught in a game of meaning-attribution and -negation. Secondly, the strategies fix the attention on themselves as a pure meaninglessness with which the subject cannot come to grips. In this chapter I explain the concept of strategy based on a comparison of two philosophical concepts that bring about a similar moment of anti-art: de Man's concept of 'materiality' and Adorno's 'technique'. I demonstrate that, although the first concept detaches itself too emphatically from the subjective, the second one stays bound to this order too much. In this chapter I present the concept of strategy emphatically as a middle course between both; a way to escape from the aporias of aesthetic pretence and the dialectics of enlightenment.

The **seventh chapter** is the first on Mutsaers. She is the only one of the three authors who explicitly names a strategy which underlies her work: folding. She derives this strategy from the philosopher Deleuze. *Le Pli* is the most important work in this context: Deleuze's study of Leibniz and baroque folding. Therefore, I will first explicate schematically the most important features of folding. The notion of virtuality, which I discussed in the parts about Armando and Brakman, calls the tune here. Folding is a way of describing this virtuality. I use Deleuze's study of Proust to elaborate on the relation between virtual folding and literary work. Such a work can convey virtuality at the level of signs. The conveyed part is emphatically not virtuality itself and neither an exact copy of it. In an analysis of Mutsaers' *Rachels rokje* I attempt to show how folding manifests itself in this novel. I show that Mutsaers creates a novel-world in which signs are connected with different things, without there being one 'master-denominator'. The difference between virtuality and an expression of virtuality becomes clear as well in the analysis of *Rachels rokje*. The strategy of folding forces the reader to conceptualize something like virtuality; however, it does not allow itself to be reduced to that.

The final two chapters will show how the strategy of folding relates to other possible ways to read Mutsaers' work. In the **eighth chapter** I will expand upon the consequences of folding for historiography on the basis of the work of the philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit. He finds in the baroque (read: folded) piece of art a paradigmatic example of how a historic experience is possible beyond a too objectivistic as well as a too subjectivistic historiography. On the basis of *Rachels rokje* I will show how Mutsaers, through folding, brings about what Ankersmit refers to. This novel revolves mainly around the historiography of the self: the autobiography. The novel criticizes objectivistic and subjectivistic approaches to the past and opens up new roads. The strategy of folding installs a middle-voice between object and subject. What *Rachels rokje* does for autobiography, Mutsaers' essays do for cultural history. On the basis of an analysis of one of her essays from the collection *Zeepijp* I will show that these essays try to call into being a new kind of literary historiography.

Finally, the **ninth chapter** is about the commitment of Mutsaers' folding-strategy. Literature about her work makes a distinction be-

tween her earlier work (up to *Zeepijl*) and her, until now most recent work, the novel *Koetsier Herfst*. The former is supposed to be autonomous literary work, while the latter is considered to be committed. I will show that this polarization is too simple. Her earlier work struggles with the autonomy of art in its relations to a commitment which applies especially to animals. In the chapters regarding Armando and Brakman, we saw that the aesthetical is at odds with virtuality; we see that in Mutsaers as well. The folds express virtuality and try to dismantle the aesthetical and human subjectivity in favour of a non-human, animal presence. I elaborate on this by basing my analysis on a text by Derrida about animals and autobiography. In that work, he conceptualizes the encounter with animalistic otherness. This brings about a feeling of shame for one's own humanity, including a shame of the second order about the still human shame. The folding, which is no longer understandable in human terms, forces the readers to conceptualize their own limitedness and brings about a feeling of shame concerning the alleged human supremacy in relation to the animalistic. Here as well, a shame of the second order arises, beyond the aesthetic and the subject.