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De affectieve plot: over de vroege romans van Marcel Möring

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Summary

General Overview

In *The Affective Plot: On the Early Novels of Marcel Möring*, I examine how the affective dimension in the first three novels of Marcel Möring (Enschede, 1957) can be described from a literary-phenomenological perspective. This inquiry culminates in the development of the concept of the ‘affective plot’.

The focus is on the three novels with which Marcel Möring first established his reputation: *Mendel* (1990, Geertjan Lubberhuizen Prize, originally published as *Mendels erfenis*), *Het grote verlangen* (1992, translated – by Stacey Knecht – as *The Great Longing*, AKO Literature Prize, over 100,000 copies sold in the Dutch-speaking region within two years), and *In Babylon* (1997, Gouden Uil and Jonge Gouden Uil, translated around the turn of the century into German, English, Hebrew, French, and Spanish).

The research is divided into three parts. After an introductory chapter, the first part examines Möring’s authorship through analysis and discussion of his autobiographical and poetical statements, as well as the literary reception of his early novels. The central section (II) provides a phenomenology of the affective, based on the work of the Leiden philosopher Gerard Visser. Part III explores how this conception of the affective can clarify the reading experience of each of the three novels, through close readings of characteristic scenes and their roles within the novels as a whole. In practice, close reading with attention to the affective leads to the formulation of an ‘affective plot’ for each novel: the underlying development of mood is crucial to the nature of the work. This outcome is examined and evaluated in the concluding discussion.

Introduction

Chapter 1 establishes that research on Möring’s work has so far focused almost exclusively on his coming to terms with the Shoah. His oeuvre deserves a broader perspective. Given the significant role of experience and affectivity in both the works themselves and the author’s poetical statements, a focus on the affective is warranted.

The study then positions itself in relation to ‘affective criticism’ within cultural studies, as it emerged with the ‘affective turn’ in North America in the mid-1990s, thanks to pioneers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Massumi. While my research aligns with the growing interest in affects, it also diverges in key respects. In my opinion, the taboo on interiority (inwardness) in affective criticism is counter-productive. And the lack of close reading leads to a generalizing approach that risks

losing contact with concrete works of art and thus scientific relevance. Dutch-language scholars Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse take a more moderate position in their *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* (2021, cf. 'The Affective Dominant: Affective Crisis and Contemporary Fiction', *Poetics Today* 42 (4) 541–574), arguing that the work of the international 'millennial generation' writers (born 1980–1999) has an 'affective dominant' not seen in earlier works.

Without disputing the historical aspect of Demeyer's and Vitse's observation, my research assumes that the affective is structuring for literary works and other art forms in general. Romanticism put it on the agenda in reaction to the Enlightenment; in earlier periods, the affective character of art was taken for granted (as seen, for example, in the attention to peripeteia in the 'plot' and catharsis for the audience). This study investigates whether existing phenomenological thought on the affective can clarify the special reading experience of Möring's early work.

The German-American philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford University) has made an intriguing attempt to operationalize the concept of 'Stimmung' within literary studies (*Stimmungen lesen: Über eine verdeckte Wirklichkeit der Literatur*, 2011; translated as *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, 2012). However, this approach does not establish a connection with narratology or stylistics – and thus with the concrete details of the literary work itself. Gumbrecht appears to interpret 'Stimmung' primarily as 'Zeitgeist', aiming to explicate the artist's horizon of understanding. For research on mood, it is, in my view, essential – as undertaken in this study – to treat the affective dimension as an independent structural element of the work and to examine which fundamental mood or trajectory of mood the literary text articulates.

The research framework is phenomenological: it is about experience; bottom-up observations can disrupt theory-driven perceptions; and the phenomenon itself provides the model.

Part I: The Authorship of Marcel Möring

Chapter 2 (Biographical) examines the image the author presents of himself through statements about his life. What 'persona' does he adopt for the public?

Möring's autobiographical statements reveal someone who, as a child, was shocked to discover he was Jewish and, initially against his will, made this discovery central to his authorship. This involves the discovery of a loss: beloved grandparents turn out to be his mother's wartime foster parents; the biological family on his mother's side perished in the Shoah, and his mother struggles with intimacy. At the same time, this entailed discovering Judaism as a cultural tradition.

Chapter 3 (Poetics) maps Möring's statements about literature and art, analyzing recurring themes: experiment, reader's and writer's emotion (the affective around the text), voice, story, chaos, wholeness, and memory (the affective within the text). His views on these themes remain fairly consistent, though attention to chaos in the story and 'wholeness' in representation and experience grows.

Möring's approach to literature is characterized by the desire to evoke emotion in the reader (as he himself experiences as a literary reader). Even when the context does not demand it, Möring speaks of awareness, experience, being moved, and being touched. The novel is, for him, a space of experience. Memory is the main vehicle of the affective, capable of bringing an experience of wholeness that, for the author, is also characteristic of experiencing a successful work of art. This is why Möring experiments with form and style, following modernists like James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. In this way, as an author he can step outside the forced linear progression and present all time layers simultaneously, maximizing (affective) experience.

Chapter 4 (Reception) analyzes the reception. *Mendel* was mainly praised for its supposed philosophical character; in *Het grote verlangen*, the affective is more prominent – as a supposed provocation by the author. In *In Babylon*, the fragmentary and chaotic nature of the novel dominates responses, with critics divided on whether this is positive; the affective 'gain' of the approach is often left unaddressed. The novels are often measured against realism, which, given Möring's poetical preferences for experiment, chaos, and emotion, leads to friction with critics' preferences.

Few scholarly essays exist, and those that do almost always focus on the representation of the Shoah; semi-scholarly essays mention both affective and religious elements.

Möring's Kellendonk Lecture, *Naakt en namaak in de literatuur* (1999, *Naked and Fake in Literature*), is a literary-political plea for attention to the special nature of the literary reading experience and the affective nature of literature. The subsequent polemic, however, focused on so-called oppositions such as art-for-art's-sake versus literary realism, with reading experience and affectivity playing no role.

Part II: Phenomenology of the Affective

How can the affective be described? The philosopher Gerard Visser points out that Western thought has generally subordinated feeling to perception and thought. Feeling is typically abstracted away. But can one validly speak about art, or reality in general, in that case?

Visser foregrounds feeling (the affective) following Nietzsche and Heidegger, examining how these two thinkers relate on this point. Nietzsche allows for individuality; Heidegger's concept of being human as 'Dasein' or being-in-the-world emphasizes immersion in one's environment. Heidegger articulates how one is always in the midst of experience (a clear subject-object relationship is only an abstraction); Nietzsche's focus on individuality prevents one from being wholly absorbed in experience – a necessary corrective, given Heidegger's problematic historical stance within National Socialism.

Heidegger, however, brings the greatest shift, according to Visser. With 'Dasein,' he offers an alternative to the objectifying discourse of science, technology, and society, already criticized as reductionist by Husserl. We are always in the midst of

experience and in-the-world, and it is incorrect and unscientific to dismiss this as irrelevant. Heidegger coins the terms ‘Stimmung’ and ‘Befindlichkeit’ to further characterize experience and its inherently affective nature: what we see and undergo ‘tunes’ us and leads to an overall feeling, ‘Befindlichkeit.’ For Heidegger, this precedes understanding and interpretation (‘Verstehen’).

These insights have consequences for the arts: if feeling is ignored, the core of experiencing an artwork is lost – in this case, the reading experience. Visser’s reading of Heidegger culminated in his 2018 study *Gelatenheid in de kunst: Nijhoff, Braque, Kawabata – van gesloten naar open vormen* (‘Gelassenheit’ in Art: Nijhoff, Braque, Kawabata – from Closed to Open Forms). Here, mood (‘Stimmung’) plays a central role. Through mood, one experiences an artwork; through mood, one is ‘opened up’ to the work – or remains closed off (as in irritation). The artwork ‘tunes’ the reader.

The specific (ground) mood of ‘Gelassenheit’ (resignation) seems, according to Visser, to be the aim of much modern art. Philosophical ‘Gelassenheit’ means letting-be, letting go, leaving to, and allowing. In a technologized society, the arts seek to let things and people ‘be’ again. When art abandons direct representation and makes room for experience, philosophical ‘Gelassenheit’ can take shape. For this, ‘open forms’ are needed: forms in which meaning and experience can freely resonate, both as expressed by the work and as experienced by the diverse audience and the creator.

Visser’s thinking about the affective in the arts opens various perspectives on literary works, especially the novels of Möring that are central here.

Part III: Three Novels

What does a narratologically and stylistically informed close critical reading, attentive to the affective (according to reader-response principles), yield for a literary-phenomenological description of Möring’s first three novels?

Chapter 6 (Mendel) shows that Möring’s debut is written according to the logic of feeling: images of somber sadness mirror images of intense longing – a pond at the beginning of the novel is part of a dreamed oasis, while at the end it has become a dark pool in a rain-soaked forest. The narrated events resist clear temporal determination; readers are situated in a present where different time layers are simultaneously present, linked to place. In his home, Mendel still sees his deceased relatives; in the fields around the town, all his earlier wanderings resonate – a receptivity to and surrender to the night, a longing for death, impossible love, family and world history.

The abundance of memories is always narrated as active flashback, from the experience of the earlier moment. Mendel does not look back on falling down the stairs at age ten; he is in the midst of it. This is achieved through strict focalization on the ‘remembered Mendel,’ immersing the reader in Mendel’s experience. The whole is a variant of the more ruminative stream of consciousness, typified here as a ‘stream of experience.’

The character Mendel withdraws from regular communication and only at the very end surrenders to love. A silent, sad dream concludes the book. This yields an affective plot in which the mood develops from longing, receptivity (the night, nature), and boredom (dreaminess), via sudden surrender to the beloved, to sorrowful 'Gelassenheit'. The fundamental sense or 'Befindlichkeit' is mourning and loss: these determine Mendel's possibilities.

Chapter 7 (*Het grote verlangen*, *The Great Longing*) discusses the story-within-the-story, 'The Man Who Forgot Everything', as a mise-en-abyme. It mirrors parts of the main narrative and delivers a clear affective statement: return to the fire of your original longing, and your deepest story will surface. It is a 'fractal,' a small image of the larger whole.

A mise-en-abyme almost always has affective value: it is the moment when an event, dream, anecdote, or embedded story, in condensed, sometimes symbolic form, refers to the story in which it appears. It flashes what is at stake. The Man Who Forgot Everything, with religious-Hasidic roots, only comes to life when he abandons rational brooding and fully trusts his longing. Something similar happens to the orphan Sam: he has completely forgotten what it was like when his parents were alive. His twin sister and brother can tell him anything, and they do. But Sam has fever dreams of the car accident in which his parents died and realizes he does know what happened. During the next storytelling session with his siblings, he takes the floor for the new, deeply sad story.

While a conventional reading, following literary criticism, mainly reveals adventure and the rawness of life, attention to what the story makes one feel shows that the longing of the title cannot be taken seriously enough. The affective plot here involves the development of mood from (again) longing, receptivity (to the world's noise), and boredom (similar dreaminess as in *Mendel*), via surrender to cherished longing, to receptive 'Gelassenheit': the life story surfaces, however sad.

Chapter 8 (*In Babylon*) shows that a novel can deconstruct itself. Almost everything built up in the layered narrative disintegrates at the end. The anticlimax is that protagonist Nathan becomes unexpectedly violent and the massive whodunit is not resolved. In this way, an affective plot is not far off. But notably, criticism and more serious analyses sometimes describe the postmodern 'collapse' of the novel, but rarely they describe the felt experience of reality – that is, how the novel's mood and atmosphere are experienced by the reader. Perhaps this is because it is unusual to write about 'mood' and its development.

In *In Babylon*, longing is still present, in the form of blissful memories of the time when everyone was still together. But Nathan sees himself as the only one left, together with his niece Nina, the – possibly illegitimate – daughter of his missing brother. The two are spectacularly snowed in, in a house full of haunting memories. Nathan secretly conversates with two friendly family ghosts, survivors of a seventeenth-century pogrom. He has done this since childhood. When one ghost casually plays with a nineteenth-century pocket watch, the other explains to the child Nathan what the word 'anachronistic' means; moments later, the watch melts away into golden drops – something that, ironically enough, can be placed quite precisely in chronological terms, because the conversation between the ghosts and

young Nathan, who fled to America with part of the family, takes place in 1944. This can be called 'plot metonymy': the event comes from the 'adjacent' extermination camps. Here, the ordinary plot quietly coincides with motifs of deportation, resulting, for those who resonate with it, in an overwhelming sense of mourning.

The mood development in this novel moves from longing, much busy, half-comic, slightly nervous action (Nathan wants to free Nina), and rationality, to anxious surrender – again to love. The anxiety remains. The underlying 'Befindlichkeit' is intergenerational mourning, which determines what is and is not possible in the action.

Conclusion

The three novel analyses show that the affective in and of a plot can only be established during the reading experience itself, just as during the writing process, form helps shape affective content. The 'detection' of the affective plot is closely tied to the reading process. Close reading is a proven method to stay in touch with the living reading experience, which arises in the resonance space of the novel and is enabled by its open form.

The affective of a plot turns out to be not only the affective action, as directly indicated or suggested as 'subtext', but also everything by which the book, often over the heads of the characters, makes an affective appeal to the reader – the affective organization of the work: intertextuality, metaphorical plot elements, metonymic plot elements (such as the watch in *In Babylon*), moments of dramatic irony, the presence of fairy tales as mirror stories (mise-en-abyme), and chaotic treatment of time. There are more stylistic and narrative 'sites' of an affective plot in Möring, and research on other novels and authors will reveal new heuristics.

A development of mood in a novel is what is first perceived during reading, but – due to the usual focus on hard plot facts and clearly identifiable themes – often the last to be made explicit, if at all. Without attention to the affective layer or shell ('Befindlichkeit'), understanding ('Verstehen') hangs in the air. The challenge is to give language to this wordless affective. This is possible by connecting it to concrete narrative and stylistic features of the work.

This affective-phenomenological approach, in my view, calls for further development toward other novels and genres. Poems, too, often show an affective movement or perhaps an affective 'clou'. It is interesting to see which accents fall within an oeuvre and which types of affective plots are dominant in a given period. Attention to the affective deserves a place before interpretation.