Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar: Gerard Reve en het schrijverschap

Praat, E.

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Summary

Gerard Reve (1923-2006) is one of the most famous and esteemed Dutch authors after the Second World War. With his debut novel De avonden [The Evenings] (1947) he established his reputation within literary circles and earned himself a position at the heart of the literary field of his times. Reve sought and caught the attention of large audiences from the early sixties. Not only his explicitly egotist literature (such as his ‘books of correspondence’ Op weg naar het einde [On the Way to the End] (1963) and Nader tot U [Nearer to Thee] (1966)) attracted attention, but also the way in which he presented himself in the public sphere. Reve had a keen eye for publicity and succeeded regularly in exposing social sensitivities. His overt homosexuality, particular religiosity, commercial attitude and alleged racist statements ensured media attention. This thesis examines Reve’s authorship in the broadest sense of the word. It starts from the assumption that the methodological distinction which is often made between the ‘oeuvre’ and the ‘public manifestation’ of an author is artificial, and that in the case of Reve it leads to and has led to underexposure of essential aspects of his authorship. The analysis of Reve’s authorship concentrates on the way in which Reve created the image of himself both inside and outside his work, and on the question how this image relates to the stereotype of the modern artist. In brief, the focus is on Reve’s self-representation.

From the beginning of Reve’s authorship, two layers can be distinguished in this self-representation: Reve put himself squarely into the spotlight not only by entertaining, moving and insulting readers, listeners and viewers, but he also reflected constantly and overtly on the whys and wherefores of his public manifestation. By doing so, Reve unveiled his own strategies – or at least insinuated as much.

In this thesis, Reve’s self-representation and his ideas on authorship are challenged by theories on the question how art and artists function in society. The focus here is on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, especially on his concepts of illusio, the fundamental and collective belief in the game of culture and its stakes, and charismatic ideology, the visible results of this belief. This research into Reve is an attempt to read Bourdieu against Bourdieu. As an agent within the literary field, Reve defined several mechanisms that are part of Bourdieu’s cultural sociology, and with these formed a basis for his provocations. His authorship therefore in one way endorses the value of Bourdieu’s theories, and in the other problematises these. Reve has proved to be able not only to play the game by the rules of art, but also to play with these same rules. Moreover, the fact that Reve was very aware of the game he played is inconsistent with the hypnotic power Bourdieu ascribed to the illusio.

This book consists of three parts, and more or less follows the chronology of Reve’s career. The first part (chapters 1, 2 and 3) covers the period from Reve’s debut to the late sixties. The prologue, in which I discuss the origin of the stereotype of the modern artist, is followed by an introductory chapter. There, I go into several essential concepts from Bourdieu’s cultural sociology (apart from the illusio and the charismatic ideology these include economic, cultural and symbolic capital, and the polar structure of the field of cultural production), criticise some of the aspects of Bourdieu’s method and set out the problems related to Reve’s authorship which this book focuses on.

The second chapter offers an overview of Reve’s poetics and deals with the way in which Reve represented himself and his fellow artists in his work from the fifties and sixties. The starting point for this chapter is ‘Gesprek met Van het Reve’ [‘Conversation with Van het Reve’], a masked self-interview published in literary magazine Tirade in 1958. I describe how Reve created a paradigmatic image of the art world and of his own position in relation to that image.
One case study forms the basis for the following chapter: Reve’s relation to painter and bohemian Frans Lodewijk Pannekoek. I analyse the book *Veertien etsen van Frans Lodewijk Pannekoek voor arbeiders verklaard door Gerard Kornelis van het Reve* [Fourteen Etchings by Frans Lodewijk Pannekoek Explained for Workers by Gerard Kornelis van het Reve] as a literary text and marketing tool and describe how Reve, both in this text and in the marketing campaign he launched for Pannekoek, broke the most important dogma of the paradigmatic art world as described by him: feigned or real desinterestedness.

In part 2, which consists of one chapter, I elaborate upon the role of the theme ‘sincerity and authenticity’ in the reception of Reve’s work and personality in the sixties and seventies. In this period, the appreciation of Reve seemed to depend on the extent to which critics, colleagues and journalists saw his work as true and original. Initially, Reve was considered a very true and sincere author and his work was generally praised. However, this image changed during the seventies, when a ‘sincerity issue’ rose and Reve was blamed for repeating himself.

Part 3 (chapters 5, 6 and 7) is about Reve’s self-representation during the seventies, eighties and nineties. During these years, Reve reflected upon himself and his authorship more than before, to such extent even that it seemed that there was no longer question of a univocal, transparent subject. He paraded the image of a split subject during these years. In chapter 5 I discuss the specific characteristics of the irony Reve used and the way in which illusions of reality are created and destroyed both inside and outside his work. Central to this chapter are the books *De taal der liefde* [The Language of Love] (1972), *Een circusjongen* [A Circus Boy] (1975) and the television show *De Grote Gerard Reve Show* [The Great Gerard Reve Show] (1974). In the sixth chapter, about Reve’s supposed racism and the novel *Bezorgde ouders* [Parents Worry] (1988), I suggest to see Reve as an implied author. Here, I problematise the autobiographical nature of Reve’s work and the boundary between fiction and reality, using theories of Wayne C. Booth, Gérard Genette, Philip Lejeune and others.

In the final chapter, which functions as an epilogue, I apply a broader perspective and loosen the reigns. Once more I consider Bourdieu’s theories of the illusio, I discuss the relationship between illusio and illusion of reality, and connect all this to Reve’s authorship. In this last chapter, the artistry of Marcel Duchamp functions as a link between Bourdieu’s sociology and the authorship of Reve. Unlike Reve, Duchamp - Frenchman by birth - found himself in the centre of Bourdieu’s field of vision. His work and self-representation bring to light several problems in Bourdieu’s theories which also apply to Reve’s authorship. These problems, however, may also be considered successful manifestations of what Nathalie Heinich refers to as ‘singularity’: the artist’s ability to distinguish himself from others.