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Kalligramme: zur Medialität einer Schrift : anhand von Paul van Ostaijens 'De feesten van angst en pijn'

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Summary

Calligrams: The Mediality of Writing in Paul van Ostaijen's *De feesten van angst en pijn* [Feasts of Fear and Pain]

"Calligram" derives from the Greek words *kalos*: beautiful, good, and *gramma*: letter, character, notch, writing, sign or sound. Calligrams, thus, can be considered as beautifully written and sonorous signs. Because of this 'beauty', calligrams constitute a special mode of writing. They do not only represent language as a signifying system, but they also expose emphatically their medial mode as writing, that is, they are both beautiful and sonorous. In this book, I investigate the conditions of calligraphic writing, its mechanisms and practices of articulation. I shall argue *that* calligrams speak and discuss *how* they speak.

I elaborate these questions through a detailed analysis of *De feesten van angst en pijn*, a book of Dutch poetry by Flemish writer Paul van Ostaijen (1896 - 1928). The poems in this volume are handwritten in black, red, blue, purple, and green ink. In addition, isolated words or phrases are distributed over large fields of white. Besides this special visual form, the strong assonant and rhythmic sound of the poems attracts the reader's attention. Reading these poems, thus, often resembles looking at images or listening to music.

Since *De feesten* is written in a very turbulent period, namely from 1918 to 1921 in Berlin, the centre of European avant-garde at that time, I also take a close look at this historical cultural framing including medial changes that took place at that time. New media such as the gramophone, the telegraph, photography, and silent films were becoming more and more important and were beginning to influence the established "old" art of literature. In *De feesten*, these media are articulated literally. Comparable to Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, Blaise Cendrars, August Stramm or Marinetti, Van Ostaijen uses writing to interweave these new aural and visual media and arts.

Calligraphic writing does not only invite an historicising reading but also asks for a theoretical debate. In my thesis then, Derrida's view on *gramma* is central. In his *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida criticises logocentric thought which would consider writing as a derivative of speech, thus assuming that it is a secondary parasitic and defective *means* of representation that remains exterior to language. Derrida, on the other hand, argues for a view of

gramma as writing in and of itself, *beyond* an opposition between *Phoné* and *Graphé*, a writing that can be *both* spoken and written.

This view of writing forms the focus for my reading of *De feesten*, of its beautiful, colourful, embellished, writing. A central issue in my thesis concerns the question of the position of the "kalos", the ornament of calligraphic writing. In light of this, I also link the first part of the compound "calli-gram" to Derrida, to his notion of the parergon, which he elaborates in *The Truth in Painting* (1987). According to Derrida, the parergon is a supplement of the work that does not remain exterior to it but meddles in its inside. In my reading of *De feesten*, I consider such aspects of writing as *parergoi* that explicitly emphasise the signifier, such as, the erratic course of the handwriting, the form of the letters, the whiteness of the page, the colours of the words, the rhythmic staccato of alliteration, and the movement of the tongue and the lips while speaking the poems. I unpack these basic assumptions in my preface.

In my first chapter, I argue that the communicative mode in *De feesten* is paradoxical. On the one hand, the words in these poems seem to speak because they function as signs that *stand in for something*. On the other hand, these signs appear to be silent and give the reader little to grasp hold of. This double movement of speaking while saying nothing is, as I claim, a central characteristic of autistic communication. I explain this hypothesis through both a detailed comparison of *De feesten* to *ich will kein in mich mehr sein* [*i don't want to be an in me anymore*] by Birger Sellin, which is acknowledged as an autistic text.

While the verbal discourse in *De feesten* remains mysterious and disorients the reader's understanding, the emphatically visual and aural calligraphy produces its own processes of signification. The medial modes of calligraphic language form the subjects of chapter 2 to 4. To make mediality more amenable to theoretical analysis, I introduce George Landow's hypertext-theory in my argumentation. Both in *De feesten* and in electronic medium hypertext, the reader's basic operation involves making hyperlinks, jumping from shells of verbal discourse to visual and aural text blocks by multiple paths and chains, in an unfinished and open-ended network of textuality. Both types of text, therefore, require an active, even intrusive, reader who makes her or his own way through the text.

In chapter 2, I show how the reader of *De feesten* can sometimes lead the textflow both from left or right, from top or bottom, and in reversed order. I

also discuss what effects this multidirectional textflow has on the processes of signification which develop a discontinuous, interlinear semantic. Another aspect of the interlinear nature of Van Ostaijen's calligraphic writing becomes clear in a textgenetic analysis of the poem *Maskers*, "originally" typewritten and afterwards transcribed into handwriting. Paradoxically, typewriting, here, is unique rather than iterable, while handwriting functions both as a kind of unmistakable signature which refers to the (absent) author as well as -since this calligraphic variant of the poem is published- to a copied, reproduced, multiplied and culturalised writing. In chapter 3, I investigate the relation between spoken and written language using Charles S. Peirce's classification of signs as icon, index, and symbol. Chapter 4 is about the semiotic operations of colours. I thereby also pay special attention to the problem that *speaking* of poetry also implies: *speaking* of processes which are not directly communicable, such as associations, synaesthesia, sensuality and emotions.

A reflection on writing also necessitates investigating the technical conditions of writing: its codes, orthography, and grammar. In chapter 5, I focus on the interdiscursive activity of distinct voices. For example, the linguistic code in *De feesten* is not restricted to Dutch but also contains phrases in French, English, German and Latin, with the effect that a polyglot babylonianism emerges through the poems. Moreover, I link the use of the unofficial orthography ("spelling Kollewijn") and the idiosyncratic use of grammar in *De feesten* to expressionist movements in Antwerp and in Berlin. Another modern discourse which is used in *De feesten* concerns the paradoxical, mystical mode of articulation. In chapter 6, I show how *De feesten* is permeated with a mystical discourse characterised by a specific textual practice, such as a highly coded terminology, an idiosyncratic narrative strategy, and a paradoxical rhetoric that asserts the inability to speak while speaking constantly about the unspeakable. These distinct discourses run through one another, building a complex network which necessitates an interlinear reading.

The final three chapters are devoted to the intermedial processes through which calligraphic writing can imitate, or transcribe, art-specific modes of articulation. In chapter 7, I use the names of Dutch and German painters -such as Oscar Jaspers, Paul Joostens, Fritz Stuckenberg, and Heinrich Campendonk which are dropped in the poems- as hyperlinks to the discourse of cubism, including its specific technology of fragmentation and dismemberment. Through a detailed analysis of the position of the focaliser as defined by Mieke Bal, I argue

that both in cubism and in *De feesten* objects are segmented through a representational performance from decentred and pluralised vanishing-points. The very technology of focalising an object as juxtaposed segments that have to be assembled by the reader proves to be a subtle means of manipulation, especially in the case of numerous dismembered female bodies in *De feesten*. I conclude that the feminisation of the subject functions as a technique for dissecting the subject.

Chapter 8 is about the relationship between calligraphic poetry and music. Music functions as a semiotic system, indeed. To what, however, do musical signs refer to? Do they have a meaning? In this context, I discuss not only similarities of the semiotic procedures of music and poetry but also the differences between them. Furthermore, I use the word 'jazz', which is articulated several times in *De feesten*, as a hyperlink to early jazz. At that time, jazz functioned as dance and entertainment music and thus held a low or (sub-) cultural position. The discourse of jazz is also implemented in *De feesten*, through the organisation of the text according to musical structures such as counterpoint and syncopation.

Synthesising chapter 7, which deals with reading visually, and chapter 8, which treats reading aurally, chapter 9 is about reading cinematographically, about the relation between the writing of *De feesten* and silent film as the new medium of that time. In this final chapter, the calligram "feuilletonvaal" ("serial dull"), invites the reader to make a hyperlink between this word and the crime serials of Louis Feuillade and Victorin Jasset. As early film was not held in high esteem, this hyperlink establishes another low cultural practice within *De feesten*. Additionally, I focus on the so-called silence of silent film. Both *De feesten* and silent film communicate the silence of their speech constantly, using technologies of articulation that are not only based on verbal discourse but also on images and music.

The thesis ends with an afterword about my interdisciplinary approach.