

## Review

Frans-Willem Korsten, *A Dutch Republican Baroque*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 231 pp. ISBN 9789462982123.



There is something paradoxical about recent scholarship on the culture of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. On the one hand, the concept of a Dutch ‘Golden Age’ continues to attract academic and popular interest worldwide, as manifested by the on-going stream of publications on distinct aspects of seventeenth-century Dutch art, literature, and society. Yet on the other hand, attempts to provide a unitary, comprehensive interpretation of the culture of this Golden Age remain few and far between. Indeed, Simon Schama’s hugely successful but equally controversial *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary, still counts as the most inclusive reading of seventeenth-century Dutch culture. In an interview from 1995, Schama himself suggested that his exceptionality in this regard could only be explained because Dutch historians are simply too afraid of indulging in grand narratives. As he stated with

characteristic rhetorical venom, the typical Dutch historian would rest happily under a tombstone that says: ‘I did not make a mistake.’

Frans-Willem Korsten, who teaches literary studies at Leiden University and holds the chair in Literature and Society at Erasmus University, is clearly not such a typical Dutch historian. His slim but remarkably wide-ranging study *A Dutch Republican Baroque* seeks to give, in implicit dialogue with Schama, a novel interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch culture in all its facets. Through a series of case-studies ranging from Vondel’s theatre (Korsten’s original specialisation) to the paintings of Frans Hals, *A Dutch Republican Baroque* explores the possible linkages between seventeenth-century literature, art,

and politics from a perspective heavily imbued with twentieth-century philosophy, in particular Deleuzian cultural analysis. This outspoken attempt to apply insights from contemporary literary and media studies to seventeenth-century Dutch culture make this a unique study that goes well beyond Schama's approach of moral geography. Moreover, as the title epitomises, *A Dutch Republican Baroque* promises to take seriously the two central aspects that can be seen as crucial for our understanding of the specificity as well as exemplarity of seventeenth-century Dutch culture in its European context: surrounded by monarchies, the Dutch Republic was exceptional as a republican polity, but its literature and art cannot be studied in isolation from the international culture of the Baroque.

In Korsten's perspective, these republican and Baroque features of seventeenth-century Dutch culture intersect in the foundational contingency and open-endedness of the Republic as such. Not created on the basis of any straightforward institutional design, the anomalous polity of the United Provinces came about in an ad hoc manner, actualising its own existence by making artifice into reality. To clarify this contingent nature of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, Korsten opens his study with the Delft Thunderclap in 1654, when a huge explosion, a fatal consequence of man's attempted domination over nature, destroyed a large part of the city and killed hundreds of its inhabitants, including the promising young painter Carel Fabritius. Korsten sees the Delft Thunderclap and Fabritius' sudden death as representative for the forked nature of the Dutch Baroque and the constant interplay between different possible realities: at split moments in time, a plurality of possible worlds coexist that are all equally real, before a single reality (in this case, the destruction of Delft and Fabritius' dead body) becomes actualised. Split moments such as these in which two possible realities coincide, Korsten argues, are highly disruptive and dramatic and thus play upon our affective nature, before a particular reality is actualised and the moment is turned into an event through theatrical representation.

The dynamics between moment and event, on the one hand, and dramatization and theatricality on the other, form the conceptual basis of Korsten's analysis. Indeed, he identifies two of such moments turned into events as the opening and closing milestones of the Dutch republican Baroque: the execution of Van Oldenbarnevelt in 1619, and the execution of the De Witt brothers in 1672. The choice for these specific political moments reveals that Korsten studies seventeenth-century art and literature as highly politicised media that give insight into how the multiplicity of worlds implies freedom, the crucial concept of republican politics, as well as creativity, needed to make sense of political contingency. To analyse this republican creativity, Korsten discusses a range of sources, some more obvious than others, from Johannes Grevius' 1624 treatise on torture to Rembrandt's etchings, and from the plays and tableaux vivants of Jan Vos to Huygens' poem *Sondagh*.

Korsten's discussion of these diverse sources does not follow a clearly structured argument, but rather mirror the topic through a Baroque sequence of sudden twists, sidesteps, and snapshots. Such an associative narrative is of course not surprising for a study so obviously framed after Deleuze, but nonetheless more careful editing could have made a significant difference: at times Korsten's analysis risks becoming redundant and merely stating the obvious precisely because of a lack of narrative organization and direction. To use Korsten's own terminology, *A Dutch Republican Baroque* is something that is being staged, a drama without perspective that does not require an audience.

More importantly, Korsten too easily makes general claims without further clarification, while missing opportunities that could have strengthened his analysis. This is especially clear in his exploration of the dominant political opposition between supporters and opponents of the House of Orange, which he frames as a collision between two incompatible worldviews, one royal, based on the *dominium* of the household, the other republican, based on the *res publica*. This supposed collision is clearly meant to support Korsten's analysis in terms of competing realities, but the crux of seventeenth-century Dutch politics is precisely that republican and monarchical principles did not necessarily exclude each other but rather coalesced, for example in the Republic's widespread support for the Stuart monarchy. Korsten however takes the republican-monarchical divide for granted, while a thorough analysis of the precise ways in which republicanism and royalism intersected in texts and images could have deepened his theoretical framework. The same goes for his short and disjointed discussion of the colonial dimensions of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Exploring the imperial model of Rome as well as crucial colonial texts by Focquenbroch, Grotius, and Van den Enden, Korsten fails to analyse in detail how exactly the *res publica*, institutionalised in the VOC and WIC, could be mobilised for claiming *dominium* and exercising *imperium* overseas. Here as well, Korsten's approach in terms of colliding realities does not truly fit the essential coalescence between republic and empire.

The shortcomings of *A Dutch Republican Baroque* are most obvious in the discussion of freedom as the implication of political contingency. As Korsten is well aware, freedom is the central concept of most seventeenth-century Dutch theorising, and especially Spinoza's elaborate analysis of the relationship between political and personal freedom and between contingency and determinism could and should have been used much more extensively by Korsten to elaborate his own philosophical enterprise. Instead of providing a thorough analysis of how the relationship between politics and freedom was theorised in Dutch seventeenth-century texts, Korsten prefers to illustrate this relationship through a short discussion of the dribbling skills of Diego Maradona. This example, taken from today's pop philosopher Slavoj Žižek, illustrates the sloppiness of Korsten's approach, which for all its attempted sophistication does not seriously mine the richness of seventeenth-century debate. As a result, the promise of a new perspective on the culture of the Dutch Republic remains unfulfilled. *A Dutch Republican Baroque* succumbs to its own logic: creating a moment that opens up a possible new reality, that reality is eventually never materialised.

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