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**Title:** In de ban van het incestverbod : analyse van een historische omslag in de verbeelding van erotiek tussen broer en zuster  
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Summary

There exists an ancient literary tradition, which envisages that incestuous relations between brother and sister end in death. Half way through the twentieth century this pattern changes. Eroticism between brother and sister, staged in the domain of the imagination, is no longer per se catastrophic. It is no longer self-evident that those involved will be damned and the traditional order based upon the prohibition of incest is no longer seen as automatically valid for all times. Nabokov’s *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), for example, tells the story of an incestuous brother and sister who grow old together after a long and happy life. In other words, in the second half of the last century and in the domain of the imagination this taboo on incest between brother and sister undergoes a significant transformation. The transcendental dimension and the associated power to fix linguistic, cultural and social structures, have, so it seems, lost their certainties. This development is the subject of my research. At first fascinated by the way eroticism between brother and sister was depicted, I have got involved in an investigation into the how and why of a fundamental and historical change.

Representations of eroticism between brother and sister always implicitly bring in the taboo on incest. They therefore also always refer to the symbolic order, the linguistic network of social regulations, rituals and communal bonds, all together usually known as culture. They refer in particular to the archetypical paradox of union and separation, or similarity and difference, the two meaning-producing principles, which are the basis for culture. Seen in this light, research in the representation of eroticism between brother and sister is a study in the entanglement of the incest prohibition, representation and the production of cultural meaning. To investigate the changing relationship between these three components within the entanglement, I have chosen to develop an interdisciplinary cultural analysis of a number of paradigmatic texts, that is to say, texts which are in my opinion representative for the recent and slightly less recent representation of dominant patterns of thought.

From the wide range of works dealing with incest I have selected three books and one film. In four separate chapters I analyse how these texts and their propositions relate to normative Western thinking in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that is to say, in the ideological context in which they are rooted and which they themselves articulate at the same time. Because in the end all representation has a perspective and is particular and local and because I do not want to enter into secondary research on intercultural differences and their effects, I limit myself to a specific contribution, exclusively produced in the Dutch language, which exemplifies what the art theoretician Kirk Pillow has coined as “at best [...] a ‘localized universality’” (2000:316).
Summary

Three factors were decisive in the choice of my material: 1) the problematising of aspects of the sibling relation concerning incest, 2) the social and cultural relevance of this problematising, which is revealed in parallel problematising of parallel paradoxal relationships, and 3) a dual periodisation – on the one hand just before and on the other long after the middle of the twentieth century, that is to say, before and after the change, which I have proposed.

The earliest work I introduce is *Mijn zuster de negerin* van Cola Debrot, written in 1934. Significant for the social relevance of the sibling relation which is here problematised, is the link between incest and miscegenation.

From the first decennium of the twenty first century date *Het satijnen hart* by Remco Campert (2006), *Ultramarijn* by Henk van Woerden (2005) and *Grimm*, a film by Alex van Warmerdam (2003). Characteristic for the relevance of the brother/sister relationships problematised in these works, are the parallel problematisations of dual notions such as art and life, own and other, image and reality or ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Texts dealing with incest always refer to the taboo; so they always refer to a law. Therefore, in their role as messenger or representative of a law, they possess an acting or performative property. This means, according to Judith Butler (1997), that they can confirm, undermine or adapt the law. In short, my material has a performative character. I display this by asking three basic questions.

1) Is eroticism between brother and sister, a violation of order, really so terrible?
2) Is the traditional order, anchored in the incest prohibition, automatically the only thinkable order?
3) If the traditional structures, which are based on a transcendent dimension and are inherent in the incest prohibition, loose their foundations, which alternative would be available?

Preceding the interpretative part of my study, I discuss the controversial and heterogeneous phenomenon of incestuous desire. Does such a thing exist at all? And if so, how do we define it? Do we conceive it as a feeling of lust or a fantasma or as a combination of the two?

Chapter one deals with these questions. Since time immemorial the relation between brother and sister has been represented as a paradox. It implies a liberating, but also a sad division of something which once was united. In mythology nostalgia reigns. Mythical representation of subjects which are related to incest, such as those of primordial dualities, elemental androgynous unities, hermaphrodites and the spherical creatures, split in two by Zeus, all of these examples are the reflections of an ancient fantasma to recuperate a lost unity.

In the twentieth century this fantasma became an object of study. Freud took the position, that the origin of fantasmas was to be found in “the inherited memory vestiges of what had been experienced by our ancestors” (2006, 10:408). Because he considered the psychic development of the individual as a concise repetition of the development of mankind, he considered (also) this fantasma – the mythical desire for the One – as part of the individual psyche. The human psyche – his theory proclaimed – would at first have been an undivided unity governed by the lust principle. By interference of reality this unity would have been irrevocably lost. As compensation fantasy was born, which would become treasurer of the repressed and which would permanently endeavour to cherish and project the idea of unity.
Without doubt, Freud was a product of his time. With his belief in the necessary repression of desire, inherent in a reality constructed on dualistic and hierarchic axioms, he was a leading representative of the metaphysical tradition which determined our worldview until deep into the twentieth century.

One of the hobbyhorses of this metaphysical tradition is the philosophical distinction between nature and culture. In line with this distinction Freud, and in mid-century Lévi-Strauss as well, identified the repression of the incestuous desire (human nature) with the birth of civilisation (human culture). Yet, they started from different points of departure. While Freud allowed incestuous desire, as a part of the psychic development, to precede the prohibition, Lévi-Strauss thought that the prohibition had always been there. In short Freud considered incestuous desire as lust, Lévi-Strauss saw it as a fantasma. Dramatically opposed is the contemporary point of view of researchers in the field of evolutionary biology. They take the position that an exchange takes place between nature and culture. Based on the tested Westermarck-effect, they claim that in regular circumstances incest does not take place, because most human beings have no particular inclination to have sex with their next of kin with whom they grew up. Ideas about incest would not create feelings of desire, but physical aversion instead. And gradually, the latter would have been promoted to a shared moral.

All of this does not change the fact that in certain cases incestuous desire can be understood as a combination of lust and fantasma. Lust and fantasma play a role in situations which, following the findings of evolutionary biology, I would like to compare to industrial accidents, situations in which a usually strong aversion struggles with functional weaknesses. Relevant examples, which involve not only lust but also (fantasmatic) mirror effects, concern adolescent experimental behaviour or cases of genetically determined sexual attraction between members of one family, which have not been in contact over a long period of time. However, inscribed in the domain of imagination, such situations are inclined to surpass the level of accident and fit into a long tradition of meaning-production relating to incest.

In general, and that is the thrust of my argument, the theories in question – on the one hand those of Freud and Lévi-Strauss (based on the exclusion of nature by culture) and on the other those coming from evolutionary biology (based on the interaction between nature and culture) – characterize the cultural climate in which the works I selected have been created in the period between 1930 and 2006. In chapters two to five, each concentrating on one of these works in particular, the shift from exclusion to interaction presents itself in a shifting entanglement of incest prohibition, representation and production of cultural meaning.

Under the title ‘A paradigm shift: from repression to interaction’ I present in chapter six, while scrutinising my material once more, a historical evaluation of a fundamental process of change. According to my findings from earlier chapters, I show parallels with ideas from traditional metaphysics, from surrealism or from differential philosophy. In this context formal periodisations are obviously not an option.

In the early 1930’s Cola Debrot wrote Mijn zuster de negerin. Set in a late colonial community in the Dutch Antilles and focused on a biological and/or metaphorical, but in the first place interracial relation between brother and sister, this short story deals with the dynamics involved in a reciprocal exclusion or inclusion of opposites. Incest in this communi-
ty is indicative of a climate of immorality and structural chaos. Surprisingly it is the old, black steward who succeeds in revealing the colonial, transgressive desire and in calling a halt to his white master. By his paternal interference, just when the main protagonist is on the point of possessing his (biological) sister, he succeeds in installing the incest prohibition – as social principle of order and repression of desire – on a local level of interracial sexual relations. In this scenario we recognise a way of thinking which, in the first half of the twentieth century and specifically in psychoanalysis, was still generally accepted. It implied that the installation of the incest prohibition was based on a rigid system of exclusion and that, as a consequence, the repression of desire was a key to culture. As a result I came to the conclusion that the performative working of this short story is mainly to be found in the realm of convention. Conform the dualism of the metaphysical tradition, it presents itself in the declaration of a repressive legality.

However, by the thirties of the last century the metaphysical tradition was already under pressure. Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God and his appeal to overcome Gods shadow had not stayed without consequences. An early twentieth-century effort to follow this appeal seems to be the revolt of surrealism against the repression of the imagination. In the spirit of this revolt Remco Campert published in 2006 Het satijnen hart, a novel in which dream and reality are regularly intertwined. The main protagonist is an elderly painter, Van Otterlo, who lost his way both in artistic and emotional matters. Deeply burrowed in his memory a secret is hidden, only shared with his half-sister. This secret, an incestuous embrace, I read as a mise en abyme. That is to say, I read it as a condensed rendering of the central theme, the dynamics of opposites. In Het satijnen hart the mysterious atonement of art and life, represented as a reconciliation of the imaginary and symbolic dimensions and of imagination and reason, functions as the liberating alternative for the traditional dualistic, repressive structuring of reality. This approach is far from pragmatic. In imitation of the surrealists Campert’s novel owes a great deal to the metaphysical notion of the One, which implies that his performative impact remains shrouded in mystery.

Ultramarijn (2005), by Henk van Woerden, is a metaphoric novel about migration. This work thematises the disruptive – and at the same time liberating – rootlessness of migration-related intermediate positions within which polarities do not exclude, but include. The red thread is “that which should not be told” (2005:284): the incestuous choice of partner or, in other words, the longing for ownness of the three main protagonists. The youngest, Özlem, is born of a secret affair between the other two, Joakim and Aysel, children from one father. As a young woman she meets a lute player, to whom she feels a strong attraction. At first she is not conscious of any blood relationship, with the result that she starts a sexual relation with her own father, and later, in the same way as her parents, she has to live with a secret. In my (metaphorical) reading of this text the erotic commitment between brother and sister, followed by the ‘no’ of the forbidding father and both their lifelong homelessness, equals the constitutional, never more terminable division of the subject and the generation of a desire (ÖZlem means desire), which per se cannot be fulfilled. The relation between father and daughter can be read as a representation of the area of tension between desire and reality and of the ephemeral possibility – in the sphere of sublimation – of bridging this field of tension.

Seen in this light Ultramarijn offers an adequate reflection of the still influential psychoanalytic thinking in which Jacques Lacan was the master. In the performative sense, Ultra-
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*marijn* undermines the traditional, dualistic structuring of reality. And this is not all. As an alternative this novel offers a view of humanity and the world, which is constructed not out of hierarchic oppositions, but out of indefinite, intermediate stages. It offers a view that is constructed out of fields of tension.

*Grimm*, a film by Alex van Warmerdam, positions at its centre the archetypical, paradoxical relation between brother and sister. De facto incest does not play a role. That nevertheless the taboo on incest is so obviously present, has to do with the emphatically stated gender differentiation between the two protagonists and the tension which this produces above all in the viewer. *Grimm* is consistently ambivalent. The script exploits different genres, to criticise them at the same time, as in a grotesque. This film, which is constructed out of difference and similarity, is, in my interpretation, a model for the field of tension between the components (difference and similarity) of meaning and identity. This field of tension, which Giles Deleuze defines as *devenir* or *to become*, functions as the birthplace of an infinite range of intermediate positions. Judging by its estranging way of dealing with the law, that is to say, its political use of the performative, this film is a teasing, playful undermining of the metaphysical tradition. In more or less the same way as *Ultramarijn*, it presents itself as the herald of an alternative order.

The representation of eroticism between brother and sister deals with the necessity of difference and the desire for unification. In my conclusion I relate the historical change in this representation to the equally historical change in the interpretation of the concept of ‘difference’. A standard is set for this interpretation by the historical ascendancy of, first, the metaphysical tradition and, second, the differential philosophy. In the metaphysical tradition differences are absolute and externally determined constants, while in differential philosophy they perform as arrangements or conventions. The gradual shift from absolutism to convention or from repression to interaction presents itself in my body of material in a slowly growing and in the end an assertive display of ambiguity.

The desire for unification defines, according to cultural historian Christina von Braun, the representation of eroticism between brother and sister as the myth of a desire that is by definition unfulfilled (1989). Viewed in this light the paradoxical relation between brother and sister is not only a model for the culturally determined dynamics of opposites. It also is a model for the psychic dynamics of the subject who, once entered in the symbolic order, will forever remain marked by a structural lack and a related longing for the unification experience of the imaginary. The longing for the One or the by definition unfulfillable desire plays an important role in all the works I deal with. In the perspective of an immanent, relational world, in which everything is transition, this longing for the One functions as part of a shuttle movement. In this perspective it is human destiny to dwell permanently in the field of tension between difference and similarity.