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The Destruction of Amsterdam

Flood Allegories in Contemporary Dutch Literature

Abstract – This article examines representations of urban destruction and of rising waters in Pieter Boskma’s *Tsunami in de Amstel* (2016) and in Guido van Driel’s *De ondergang van Amsterdam* (2007). It foregrounds the ways in which these texts reflect productively on visualisations and narrative frames of catastrophe, and how they propose alternative temporalities (in the case of Boskma) and alternative visual perspectives (in van Driel) for imagining possible urban end-times. At the background of this article is an increased tendency in ecocritical approaches to read representations of destructive climate change (in prose literature, in particular) in terms of their implications for understanding real-world radical climatological and environmental change. Such perspectives are complemented here with an examination of allegorical readings of flood in a poetry collection and graphic novel.

The last years have seen a marked interest in representations of destructive climate change and flooding in literature (see e.g. Dobraszczuk 2017, Bracke & Ritson 2020), with a strong tendency in ecocritical approaches to read such representations in terms of their implications for understanding radical climatological and environmental change. In the context of Dutch literature, critics have foregrounded a perceived lack of such representations (Bracke 2016; see also Anker 2018; Craps & Mertens 2019; Rouckhout 2019). Pieter Boskma’s *Tsunami in de Amstel* (*Tsunami in the Amstel*) and Guido van Driel’s *De ondergang van Amsterdam* (*The Destruction of Amsterdam*), two contemporary texts that imagine a flooded Amsterdam, would seem to respond to this perceived lack of engagement with flooding on the part of Dutch literature. In Pieter Boskma’s poetry collection *Tsunami in de Amstel* (2016), rising waters, evoked in lofty iambic heptameters, flood Amsterdam until only a few iconic towers – the Westertoren; then the Rembrandttoren – are left standing. Similarly, in the elegantly painted panels of Guido van Driel’s graphic novel *De ondergang van Amsterdam* (2007), water is shown rising up from the earth to overwhelm the Netherlands’ first city, causing chaos and devastation. While Van Driel and Boskma draw in these works on contemporary tropes of radical climate change, the tropes of the flood and of urban destruction in both books are not easily recoverable for ecocritical readings. In a way that is closely bound up with the formal features of both works, something more complex than the vocalizing of climate concerns is at stake here, with Boskma and van Driel utilizing the trope of the flood to evoke a range of possible meanings, from personal reckoning with past poetics, reflections on loneliness and homelessness in the contemporary city, to metapoetical considerations about art’s ability to convey catastrophe.

This article examines representations of urban destruction and of rising waters in Boskma’s *Tsunami in de Amstel* and in van Driel’s *De ondergang van Amsterdam*, suggesting an allegorical reading of these tropes. I foreground the ways in

which these texts reflect productively on visualisations and narrative frames of catastrophe, and how they propose alternative temporalities (in the case of Boskma) and alternative visual perspectives (in van Driel) for imagining possible urban end-times. The focus on allegorical readings is concomitant with an interest in the specific media utilized by Boskma and van Driel, with the ritualistic mode of the lyrical poem (cf. Culler 2017) and the subjectifying focalizations of the graphic novel (cf. Mikkonen 2017) arguably geared towards complex allegorical associations, rather than towards mimetic strategies. I will set out by a brief contextualization of flood representations in the Dutch context, and by outlining the groundwork for an allegorical reading of the trope of the flood.

1 Dutch Literature and the Trope of the Flood

Dutch literature has a long tradition of living and writing with the water. Reflections in literature, art, and popular culture range from medieval paintings such as that of the Saint-Elizabeth's flood of 1421 to literary novels such as *De Waterman* (1933) or the various personal and communal reminiscences of the devastating flood of 1953 (see e.g. Jensen 2018; Ritson 2019: 27-71). In the wake of that latest catastrophic event, floods became a popular feature in the Dutch Young Adult genre: a 2013 article counted more than 40 children's and Young Adult novels about the 1953 flood (Geuze 2013; cf. Vuijsje 2013). The rich amount of Young Adult novels contrasts with the more muted response in high-brow literature, where, as Ad Zuiderent argues, there was no such thing as 'a great literary novel of 1 February 1953' (Zuiderent 2002; see also Zuiderent 2003). The same can arguably be said about Dutch literature's more recent engagement with the spectre of possible floods. While in contemporary Anglophone literature, in particular, the threat of catastrophic global warming and future flooding has given rise to powerful near-future disaster fiction (see e.g. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* [2017]; Maggie Gee's *The Flood* [2014]), Dutch literature has remained seemingly unaffected by the spectre of rising sea levels, in particular with respect to the effect on coastal cities. Van Driel and Boskma would seem to be exceptions to this apparently lukewarm response to environmental questions. But it is noteworthy – as I will argue at more length below – that both works are not explicitly concerned with exploring anthropogenic climate change, but are more interested in questioning the rhetoric and formal modes of representation available to describe a world in motion. In this sense, they are part of a growing body of literature that approaches the question of real-world environmental concerns sideways rather than head-on.

The limited attention to flooding in literature comes against a backdrop of considerable research, over the past decades, into the Netherlands' long-lived interaction with the water. Recent studies of flooding have focused on perspectives from cultural history, nation-building, and disaster studies (see e.g. Jensen 2019; Esser & Meijer Drees 2016). Such studies often have a predominant historical focus: the NWO Vici project *Dealing with disasters*, for example, focuses on the period 1421-1890 (Dealing 2020; see also Duiveman 2019). Increasing attention has also been given to flooding and climate change preparedness within the field of futures

studies, for example in the publication *Netherlands in the Future* (NEAA 2010), and including literary and cultural perspectives, such as the research project *Imaginarities of the future city* (Imaginarities 2020). The work of Lotte Jensen and others has done much to clarify the cultural symbolism underlying representations of flooding, and to outline a recurring repertoire of images. In literary studies, by contrast, there have been few examinations of Dutch contemporary representations of flood to date (see, however Ameel & Craps 2020).

Up to a degree, the perceived absence in literature and literary studies is one of perspective and entangled with readerly expectations that emphasize the identification of natural phenomena in literature with real-world environmental concerns. In the speculative ‘other prose’ of authors such as Sybren Polet, for example, or in the poetry of Lies van Gasse and Anneke Brassinga more recently, the threat of worlds collapsing is writ large, but rarely in a way that easily lends itself to an environmental programme. Even in a number of recent Dutch realist novels that foreground the flood, this trope is arguably applied in a way that is only tangentially linked to anthropogenic climate change, and drawn upon for its ability to provide allegorical suggestions of crisis, and in particular, crisis between the protagonist and other characters. In a novel such as Marijke Schermer’s *Noodweer* (*Heavy Weather*; 2016), the destructive forces of flooding are suggestive of a marriage in crisis; in Christiaan Weijts’s *Via Cappello* (*Via Capello*; 2008), the protagonist’s visit to Venice during *acqua alta* (with foreshadowing of worse flooding to come) coincides with the high tide of the protagonist’s stormy relationship. Even in Lieke Marsman’s *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (*The opposite of a human*; 2017), a novel that has been somewhat prematurely hailed as the first climate novel in the Netherlands (see Anker 2019), catastrophic flooding functions mostly as a symbol for emotional and relational restraints (as well as the boundaries of sexuality or gender) being breached, and takes place at the moment the protagonist is overwhelmed by the break-up of her relationship.

Readerly expectations ranging from a mimetic to a rhetoric understanding of natural phenomena also correspond to broader paradigm shifts within ecocriticism. Some of the classical ecocritical studies of the past few decades are grounded in a deep suspicion towards the dogmatic separation of world and word, and explicitly aim to foregrounded literature’s referential nature, and the material imperatives literature refers to – in the words of Lawrence Buell, to ‘make discourse accountable to the object-world’ (see Buell 1996: 91). Ecocritical approaches have provided important correctives to literary studies’ focus on language by foregrounding the materiality and agency of the non-human world (see e.g. Iovino & Opperman 2014). This move has at times come at the expense of the complex rhetoric functions of narrative interactions with the environment. In some of the more recent ecocritical studies of flooding, the flood trope is understood almost exclusively in terms of its real-world referentiality, as an indicator of climate change (Bracke & Ritson 2010: 1; Trexler 2015: 82–83). But as Greg Garrard argues, the challenge for ecocritics is always two-fold: ‘to keep one eye on the ways in which “nature” is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse’ (Garrard 2012, 10).

Allegory is arguably particularly well-placed to approach this two-fold challenge. As a rhetorical trope and as a reading strategy, it retains the possibility of literal readings while also remaining attentive to a full range of other meanings. Following Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin, and others, allegory has been understood as a mode of writing particularly attuned to times of crisis, and a fitting ‘figure for the incommensurabilities of the world today’ (Jameson 2001: 25). In twenty-first-century literature, allegory arguably ‘appears as one of [...] [the] primary narrative records’ of ‘a crisis of ecological modernity’ (DeLoughrey 2019: 6). For the reader, it invites a position close to that of the protagonist, who must go on an uncertain quest for meaning (Lyytikäinen 2012), in a way that resonates with current epistemological uncertainties. Finally, the way in which allegorical writing draws attention to its own artificiality makes it a pertinent figure to explore and question literature’s abilities (or inabilities) to engage with complex and multiscalar environmental phenomena.

2 Approaching Allegory

During Antiquity and the Middle Ages, a fourfold typology was developed to unpack the polysemous nature of allegorical figures, identifying, respectively: the literal, the spiritual, the moral or tropological, and the anagogical level (Tambling 2010: 26 ff.).¹ An occurrence in a Biblical text, such as the exodus from Egypt, could be read in *literal* terms, as having historically happened; or it could be read as a foreshadowing of events that would come to pass in the New Testament (prefiguring Christ’s resurrection), with *spiritual* underpinnings; a realization of such dimensions would attune a knowledgeable reader to the *moral* choices to be made, in view of the final purpose (*anagogy*) of the creation’s temporal order and that of mankind within it. These different levels can be approached also for their effect on the reader, with the spiritual level indicating to the reader what to believe; the moral level indicating how to behave; and the anagogical what to expect in the future (*ibid.*: 27). Later critics have added their own inflections, with Frederic Jameson, in *Allegory and Ideology* (2019), the latest critic to translate these various levels to fit their own vision of how literary works reflect on humanity’s march through world history.

In what follows, this four-fold typology will provide a rough guideline with which I approach the different meanings evoked by the flood trope in Boskma and van Driel. The *literal* dimension relates to the flood as actually occurring within the storyworld, and potentially resonating with images of real-world floods in the readers’ actual world. The *spiritual* dimension is where we can locate readings as the punishing flood of sin, whether couched in a Christian framework, or in a critique of capitalism (as exemplified by Jameson approach to allegory), or relating to other systems of ideology or belief. The *moral* dimension reflects on how the text indicates possible ways to behave on the basis of the character’s or narrator’s actions, focalization, or rhetorical position. And the *anagogical* dimension is where we can relate images of flood with a reflection on what to expect of the future.

1 In the classical typology the *spiritual* is also referred to as *allegorical*.

The fourfold typology is permeated by a fifth level: the metapoetical, which reflects on how the literary form of the text advances possible frames of narrating for what we are meant to believe, for how we hope to behave, and for how we are able to imagine what we expect from the future. In poetry, this metapoetical level manifests itself among others in verse form and prosody; in the graphic novel, it is apparent in the rhythmic progression of gutters, panels, and visual perspectives. The metapoetical has arguably always been present within allegory, as a way to indicate possible forms of future storytelling. Finally, it is important to emphasize that I approach the flood trope in my reading of both texts as *indeterminate*, in a postmodernist tradition in which '[e]very expression belongs simultaneously to several frames of reference' (McHale 1987: 142), and in tune with a broader approach within the postmodern paradigm in which allegory has become a conscious mode with which to destabilize readers' possibilities to assign meaning, with postmodernist artists finding 'in allegory's overdetermined signs and overburdened artifice a way to undermine and destabilize rather than reinforce universal truths' (Taylor & Winquist 2003: 7). I assume no clear keys within the text itself, or its paratexts, or in authors' notes or interviews, that allow to privilege one particular level or meaning.

3 Tsunami in de Amstel

Pieter Boskma's poetry collection *Tsunami in de Amstel*, which appeared in 2016, would at first sight seem to satisfy recent calls in the Low Countries for more explicit literary engagement with radical climate disruption. The collection features a range of images of future destruction, rising water, and threatening climate change, all reaching a climax in the final cycle of the collection, the eponymously titled 'Tsunami in de Amstel' (69–82), which imagines the flooding of Amsterdam.² As a closer reading below will show, the collection is structured around two different modes, one lyrical, the other epic and narrative, both with different repercussions for how tropes of flood are communicated. At the time of publication, climate change-induced sea level rise had already become very much more part of the public imagination about possible futures, local as well as global; by comparison, when *De ondergang van Amsterdam* was published, only a year after *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, public awareness of possible climate change-related sea level rise was only beginning to gain traction. In reviews, however, ecocritical readings were largely absent, with reviewers foregrounding instead the broader shifts in poetics in Boskma's work. Any reading would thus be well informed to start with a brief contextualization of the text within Boskma's broader oeuvre.

Pieter Boskma (born 1956) is a poet associated with the 'Maximalen', a loosely organised group of poets that made their debut in the late 1980s and that has been deemed 'the last genuine poetical movement' in Dutch poetry. The group wanted

² 'Amstel' is the name of the river that has given Amsterdam its name. The idea of a tsunami taking place in this small, channeled river of only 31 kilometers length, is obviously meant not to be referring to anything that could happen in the real world. It is not entirely dissimilar to talking of a storm in a glass of water.

to react against what they perceived to be then-dominant hermetic poetry, and to exploit links with popular and mass culture, making use of deliberate provocation along the way (see Joosten & Vaessens 2006: 16). Despite this worldly program in his early poetry, Boskma has also been considered a ‘cosmic poet’, in whose work cosmogenic acts and poetic creation go hand in hand (Poetry International 2012). Expressions of personal mourning have become more pronounced in his work since the death of his wife, in 2008, and the death of several of his colleagues and friends through suicide or euthanasia, a context which was noted by several reviewers of *Tsunami in de Amstel* (see e.g. Mertens 2016; Monna 2016). The collection overtly explores the relevance of such highly personal autobiographical conditions (e.g. Boskma 2016: 65).

The poetic reflections on personal loss and on earlier connections with Dutch literary movements are set, in *Tsunami in de Amstel*, in a time of radical climate change. In the first cycles of the book, there are several indications that the described time is one of severe climatic disruption, with intimations also of urban apocalypse. The first poem, ‘Wenteling’ (‘Rotation’), opens with unseasonable weather: ‘Het jaar begon toen koud. / [...] / Het was gewoon te laat, / zelfs het opgefokt klimaat krabde / zichzelf achter de wolken [...]’ (7).³ The sense of climatic disruption is repeatedly linked also to possible urban destruction, as when, in the poem ‘Zonder Titel’ (‘Without Title’), the lyric I observes ‘een ijzige nachtmerriewind uit het noorden / en zuidwaarts een stad in het fik’ (25).⁴ Cities are threatened by fire (25, 27, 28), but also by the sea, and there is a warning about the possibility of what a vengeful sea might be able to bring about: ‘De zee zou weer spreken en ditmaal de waarheid’ (25); with the suggestion that the sea is seeking revenge for human destructive exploitation and bycatch in overfishing: ‘zij herbergt geen monsters, alleen maar verdriet / sinds bij duizenden tonnen per dag / de vissen voornamelijk sterven voor niks’ (25).⁶

A ‘tsunami’ is announced first on p. 27, but not as part of a frightening future. When the lyric I considers the rising water, the tone is one of resignation, even relief. He imagines a man at the shore who, ‘wanneer de tsunami kwam’, ‘niet langer vluchten zou, wetend het dodende water / een blinketuin waar midden in de nacht de bloemen opengaan’ (27).⁷ Catastrophe does not spell the end, but a new beginning, which will breed new forms.

Natural powers are not described as something external, but as something akin to, or ultimately even coeval with poetry itself. This happens in a manner that draws on romanticist conventions of correspondences between nature and human consciousness (De Man 1983: 194 ff.) but that is also distinctive of the broader poetics of Boskma’s oeuvre. One often noted feature of Boskma’s poetry is how it

3 ‘The year, then, set out as cold [...] / It was simply too late / even the fucked-up climate scratched / itself behind the clouds.’

All the translations are by the author. The translations do not aspire to accurately capture the metric or sound-associative properties of the original.

4 ‘an icy nightmare-wind from the north / and to the south a city on fire’.

5 ‘The sea would speak again and this time the truth’.

6 ‘she does not shelter monsters, only sorrow / since by the thousands tons each day / the fishes die mostly for nothing’.

7 ‘when the tsunami came’, ‘would no longer want to flee, knowing that the killing water / [was] a glimmering garden where in the middle of the night flowers would bloom’.

evokes the shoreline's, and water's, alignment with the lyric I and with poetic language itself.⁸ The coast line features as a particularly important landscape in Boskma's second poetry collection, *Messiaanse Kust* (*Messianic Coast*; 1989), in which the coast appears as the site for a mystic revelation. *Messiaanse Kust* is incidentally also the collection in which the lyric I expresses the desire to be a 'bloedmooie umwelt-terroriste' – a 'stunningly beautiful *umwelt-terroriste*',⁹ identifying his poetic program of innovation and contestation with that of an ecological terrorist.

Correspondences between the non-human world and language abound in *Tsunami in de Amstel*: in 'Levensroep' ('Call to Life', 49–52), for example, human and non-human, the face of the beloved and the threatening river, collapse when 'het stof / weerkeert naar een lichte trilling in de Amstel / en je tot in elke uithoek ver-rimpelde gelaat' (51).¹⁰ What remains is language itself: 'en als er dan niets anders is op deze aarde, // dan zal tenminste nog het woord het uitschreeuwen / van protest' (51).¹¹ The recurring foreshadowing of an apocalyptic flood (in 'een lichte trilling'; 'a soft trembling...') appears as a pointer to a time of reckoning which will erase what is inconsequential, leaving untouched the ultimate foundations in Boskma's poetry, which are firmly intertwined: love, poetic language, and the renewing force of nature.

Repeatedly, then, natural phenomena do not appear as mimetic references to actual, or possible, flooding, but as allegorical figures for poetic expression. The forces of nature and poetic language are presented as sharing a similar destructive potential. Poetic naming is a demiurgic act with world-shaping properties: in the poem 'Zonder Titel' ('Without Title'), the lyric I ponders the dangers of naming and hence of creating: 'Je geeft iets een titel en het ontwaakt. [...] / Wat niet benoemd wordt is wat niet bestaat' (25).¹² In 'Zonder titel', such considerations lead the lyric I to proceed cautiously, with the empty signifier of the title a deliberate strategy to leave a world in slumber. The title of the collection, by contrast, appears in this light as a purposeful act of naming; the tsunami in the city river is not something which is merely described, but a world that is evoked and deliberately awakened.¹³ Poetic utterances in a poem such as 'Zonder Titel' foreground lyric's 'ritualistic' characteristics (as opposed to the 'fictional/representational' element) in which the poem seeks 'to be itself an event rather than the representation of past events' (Culler 2017: 132). The poems in the first part of *Tsunami in de Amstel* ar-

8 The oeuvre of Boskma can be described in terms of water: Joost Zwagerman, in his afterword to the selected works of Boskma, makes the point at some length, arguing that Boskma's work is 'as elementary as water, similar to patient water, to hasty water, secretive water, lost water, written water, sung water' (2006: 268). Other critics highlighted the importance of maritime landscapes and the shores of the Netherlands for Boskma's poetry. Bas Belleman highlights the importance of dune landscapes in his work, even likening Boskma's poems to dunes (Belleman 2010); Odile Heijnders argues that the Dutch 'coastal landscape [is] woven together with his poetical development' (Heijnders 2006).

9 The original uses the German word in the female gender, with clear satirical undertones.

10 'dust / returns to a soft trembling in the Amstel / and to your face, wrinkled all over'.

11 'and if there would be nothing else on this earth / at least the word would shout out / in protest'.

12 'You give something a title and it wakes up. [...] / What is not named is what not exists'.

13 In this respect, it resembles one of the other notable apocalyptic flood narratives by a contemporary of Boskma: *Weerwater* (2015) by Renate Dorrestein, in which a catastrophe of global proportions is put in motion the very moment the narrator of the novel (a writer called Dorrestein) names the file on her computer 'Weerwater' (see Ameel & Craps 2020).

guably conform to this ‘ritualistic’ framework, in which the dominant temporal framework is that of an urgent ‘now’ (*ibid.*), and in which the reader is actively invited to participate: ‘Je geeft iets een titel’ (‘You give something a title...’) – with ‘You’ referring at once to the poet as well as to the addressee of the poem.

3.1 ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’

By the time the reader arrives at the final cycle of the poetry collection ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’, they can be expected to be attuned to the intimations of apocalypse, and to the suggestion of an alignment between lyrical language and the forces of the natural world. But whereas in the first part, the focus has been on lyrical evocation, the title cycle ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’ takes a turn towards a more narrative mode of storytelling. ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’ is structured as an epic poem, written in coupled verses of roughly seven iambic feet each. This iambic heptameter constitutes a prosody that is natural enough in the Dutch language, but it also has its roots in epic prosody, and in Dutch translators’ endeavors to translate antique metre. The iambic heptameter has been used to translate dactylic hexameters – the classic metre of epic poetry – from Latin into Dutch (e.g. d’Hane Scheltema in her translation of Ovidius’s *Metamorphoses*), similar to English adaptation of the epic metre (notably in Chapman’s Homer). With the epic metre, the reader is warned that they have arrived in a different kind of temporality altogether – not the relentless ‘now’ of the lyrical poem (cf. Culler 2017: 132) – but rather the epic time of an ‘absolute past’ (cf. Bakhtin 1981: 13–14) or of an absolute future. The epic framework also raises questions about the status of allegory in the poem: is the flood to be read in terms of the heroic epic, the cosmogenic epic, or possibly even of the mock-epic?

The cycle begins with a depiction of slowly submerging Amsterdam:

Tsunami in de Amstel, de bomen hebben verloren,
de grachtenpanden krimpen een verdieping per minuut.

Carré al half verzwolgen, zo meteen de Hermitage,
dan de oude, zich nog nergens van bewuste binnenstad. (71)¹⁴

The reference to cultural temple ‘Carré’, the first building mentioned in the poem, is a pointer to a possible biographical reading of the poem as taking stock of Boskma’s own oeuvre and poetic program within half a century of Dutch poetry. Carré is not only the most well-known theatre in the Netherlands, it is also the scene, in 1966, of ‘poetry in Carré’, a pivotal event for public poetry performance in the Netherlands, and an event celebrated forty years later (2006) on location with Boskma as one of the poets present.

Somewhat unexpectedly, a protagonist is introduced, through whom the subsequent events are recounted, a young woman looking out from her attic window at ‘de kolkende Apocalyps’ (71).¹⁵ Amidst the scene of destruction, there is little

¹⁴ ‘Tsunami in the Amstel, the trees have lost, / the houses along the canals shrink by a storey each minute / Carré is already half swallowed, soon the Hermitage, / and then the old, unsuspecting inner city.’

¹⁵ ‘the churning Apocalypse’.

sense of panic; instead, the description is permeated with a rather underwhelmed feeling of resignation that has been announced earlier in the poetry collection: ‘er kwam iets kalms over haar, verlossing, overgave’ (71).¹⁶ Resignation is associated with the awareness of coming death, but also with a sense that destruction is aligned with the narrator’s creative powers:

zoals een stervende die voelt dat het zover is,
of een kunstenaar die eindelijk het punt bereikt heeft

dat hij buiten modes en conventies treden kan,
op onbekend terrein waar hij alleen maar vrij kan zijn (71)¹⁷

An intriguing element is added by the verb ‘buiten [...] treden’ (‘moving beyond’); the verb is typically used for a river that exceeds its boundaries. Here again, the image of the river is one that is collapsed with the powers of a poet, and with free-running imagination and artistic freedom.

As the water rises and Amsterdam becomes ever more submerged, the poem introduces a new suggestion – that the unreal events find their origin in drugs-induced hallucinations on the part of the protagonist: ‘Kwam het door de wijn, de tramadol, de cannabis, / die zij gelijktijdig en niet zuinig had geconsumeerd?’ (73)¹⁸ Adding to the sense of unreality is that life seems to continue as normal underneath the rising water: ‘Alleen aan het breken van het zonlicht op de golfjes / zag je dat de stad wel degelijk verdrinken was’ (73).¹⁹ The young woman dances across the waves, or realizes she is in boat; and is drawn towards the iconic Westertoren, one of the many landmarks from touristic Amsterdam that seem to structure the events in the poem. In increasingly confusing and anecdotal associations, the rowing boat in which she sits is moving eventually towards a second, still visible tower, the Rembrandttoren (the highest tower of the city), while on the way she quotes ‘een prachtgedicht van Boskma’ (‘a beautiful poem by Boskma’) whom she considers one of the ‘sublieme zangers’ (‘sublime singers’) (77).

At the tower, she meets Rembrandt, who claims the flood is a punishment for the Netherlands’ lack of interest in art – again a gesture towards poetry and art as being aligned with the rising water. Rembrandt is described as akin to ‘een golf / die even een menselijke vorm had aangenomen / maar zich nu weer langzaam leek terug te trekken / in de vloed die misschien dus wel een *levend wezen* was’ (81; original emphasis).²⁰ Boskma’s poetry has been repeatedly described in terms of water (see e.g. Zwagerman 2006), and the identification of Boskma’s poetry as

16 ‘a calmness came over her, liberation, submission’.

17 ‘like a dying person who feels that the moment is there at last, / or like an artist he reaches at last that point / when he can move beyond fads and conventions / on unknown terrain where he can be only free’.

18 ‘Was it because of the wine, the tramadol, the cannabis, / which she had consumed simultaneously and not modestly?’ Tramadol is an opioid used as painkiller. There is an intriguing similarity with another Low Countries description of apocalyptic flood: in Roderik Six’s *Vloed* (‘Flood’, 2012), the arrival of incessant rain is suggested to have found its origin in drugs-induced hallucination (see Ameel & Craps 2020).

19 ‘Only the breaking of the sunlight on the waves’ an indication ‘that the city had really drowned’.

20 ‘a gulf / which for a brief moment had taken human form / but which now seemed to slowly pull back / into the flood which maybe was a *living being*’.

analogous to the natural elements that punish Dutch mediocrity is further confirmed when the apocalyptic landscape itself takes the shape of words, and when the female protagonist sees the title ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’ appear: ‘het leek wel een schilderij, en het was of een vlucht ganzen / [...] een titel trok / waar het water aan de hemel raakte. *Tsunami in de Amstel* / meende zij te lezen [...]’ (82).²¹

The final cycle presents the reader with a number of different possible readings of the flood: in addition to a *literal* reading (including a reading as visionary hallucination), it is possible to read the flood as poetic reckoning, as artistic revenge on a parochial and narrow-minded national culture (which could approximate the *spiritual* level in the poem’s worldview); or as providing perspectives into possible futures (*anagogical*). In terms of metapoetical properties, the cycle presents the reader with a particularly formal mode of representing flooding and urban destruction. The serious subject matter and elevated style would seem to suggest a serious and sincere paradigm, but there are several elements that undermine this. With its absurd occurrences, elements of slapstick, and post-card imagery of Amsterdam (jumbling together marihuana use, the appearance of Rembrandt, the Westertower, grumpy cyclists, and McDonald’s), ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’ gives the impression of a mock-epic rather than that of a genuine attempt at epic. A reading strategy that approaches the text as mock-epic will likely discard any suggestions of possible real-world environmental concerns, and focus instead on the text’s formal playfulness and self-irony.²²

In its turn from lyrical poetry to epic narrative form, *Tsunami in de Amstel* adds intriguing insights into the affordances of different kinds of textual genres for confronting the reader with an imagined world undergoing radical upheaval. The narrative and epic form of the long eponymous poem adds an identifiable character, mythical timeframe, and a clear sequence of narrated events (as compared to the lyrical poems in the first section). It could be assumed that the presence of a protagonist might be able to offer a particular point of view and an element of *qualia* – the ‘what it feels like’ of events. But in Boskma’s treatment, a personalized and embodied perspective is largely lacking. The reader gains limited access to the young woman’s thoughts or affects in the epic poem; on the contrary – she is actively silenced and objectified, even groped at one point (76) by a procession of elderly men (Boskma among them), who continuously put words in her mouth (when she sings, she doesn’t use her own words but sings the poems of Boskma

21 ‘it seemed a painting, as if a flight of geese / [...] created a title / where the water touched the heavens. *Tsunami in de Amstel* / she thought she read [...]’.

22 In its mock-epic effect, ‘Tsunami in de Amstel’ intriguingly resembles another long poem published in the same year as Boskma’s (2016), which similarly evokes the destruction of Amsterdam by flooding: *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem* by Frederick Turner. Turner’s poem, written in (something approaching to) iambic pentameter, and structured in ten books, imagines a catastrophic flood that drowns 2067 Amsterdam. One of the protagonists, Anneliese Grotius (descendent of the jurist Hugo Grotius), escapes the drowning Netherlands with Rembrandt’s *The Night Watch* in tow. The metre is lofty and the subject similarly high-headed: nothing less is at stake than to ‘save the world’, with the introduction by the editors putting the onus on the readers to be inspired into climate action by the poem (Turner 2016: n.p.). But the layout and cover of this e-publication by the fantasy publisher Baen Books have a distinctly kitschy look, and the descriptions of Amsterdam do not go beyond conventional tourist highlights, with Anneliese described as a ‘Vermeer girl’ and Amsterdam confined to Hooftstraat [sic], Singelgracht, Rijksmuseum, Rembrandttower, and ‘Sama-Sebo’ – the ‘celebrated old Indonesian restaurant in the former museum district in Amsterdam’ (Turner 2016: n.p.).

and others; 79). Even Rembrandt returns from beyond the grave to lecture her (80–82). The effect gestures towards the limits of the genre of the epic poem in a contemporary treatment. The shift towards narrative in the second part of Boskma's volume, with a recounting of past events and a distinctive third-person character, adds little to the reader's confrontation with a world that is transformed into a 'kolkende Apocalyps' (71).²³ In its shift away from the earlier immediacy of lyric address, the epic poem gives up what is arguably one of poetry's most powerful abilities: the capacity to invite the reader at the centre of a world-in-language by enabling them to share in the production of lyrical utterances. Culler argues that in ritualistic poetry, it is possible for the poem to position 'the reader as the speaker, who repeats this ritualistic discourse' (Culler 2015: 24). By virtue of its direct address and temporal immediacy, the reader of such ritualistic lyrical poetry in effect reproduces the poetic utterance together with the poetic voice in the act of reading, creating the conjectured world in all its attributes on the way – an activity that is intimated among others in Boskma's address of a 'you' who refers to poet and addressee simultaneously. Such immediacy is lost in the iambic heptameters of 'Tsunami in de Amstel'.

One way to complement Boskma's allegorical figures of flood, and the way these branch out into different allegorical implications, is to look at similar flood tropes in cultural representations by drawing on other media. In what follows, such a comparison will be undertaken by examining Guido van Driel's graphic novel *De ondergang van Amsterdam*. Not surprisingly given van Driel's chosen medium, the focus of my examination will in considerable part be on visual approaches to the trope of the flood.

4 *De ondergang van Amsterdam*

The work of Guido Van Driel – who is an autodidact – is part of a new wave of high-quality Dutch graphic novels 'balancing somewhere on the undefined interstices between comic book and literature' (Bassant 2011), and he has been hailed – somewhat hyperbolically – as the Netherlands' 'only graphic novelist' (Bastijns 2007). In its formal features, van Driel's work stands out for how it uses painting as medium, rather than drawing, to create the individual images, each of which could arguably function as an artwork in their own respect (Pollmann 2005). *De ondergang van Amsterdam* is his sixth graphic novel. Its protagonist is a young man, Titus, who is employed renovating a house in the city centre of Amsterdam; unable to find a home, he decides to live temporarily in the attic of the house. One possible reading of the graphic novel is that as an investigation of homelessness and loneliness in the contemporary city. The narrative follows Titus's musings as he gazes from the window at the small activities taking place on the square below, as he wanders through the city, and through his conversations with his colleague Robbie, a man with outspoken opinions about humanity and the coming end of the world.

Several of the elements of how the trope of the flood takes shape in Guido van Driel's *De ondergang van Amsterdam* provide corollaries to *Tsunami in de Am-*

23 'churning Apocalypse'.

stel – one reviewer of van Driel incidentally titled his review ‘Tsunami in Amsterdam’ (Kempeneers 2007). Similar to that of Boskma’s *Tsunami in de Amstel*, the storyworld of the graphic novel is defined by ontological indeterminacy, in which it is unclear to what extent the urban destruction is actually occurring in the characters’ world, or whether we are witness to the protagonist’s lively hallucinations – a disorienting strategy common in a range of literary renderings of urban apocalypse (see Ameel 2016: 795 ff.). A striking similarity between both texts is the role which Rembrandt plays as a guide of sorts: Titus identifies with the celebrated painter and was named by his father after Rembrandt’s son by the same name. Rembrandt’s role is arguably even more important than in Boskma’s text: *De ondergang van Amsterdam* was originally commissioned by the magazine *Vrij Nederland* to commemorate 400 years since Rembrandt’s birth; the plates were first published in separate installments.

A range of allegorical readings of the flood in van Driel’s book are possible: a reading as *literal* occurrence in the actual storyworld, including the possibility of hallucination; or a reading activated by references to Biblical cities and by the critique of capitalist growth narratives in the book (the *spiritual* framework in the classical allegorical fourfold typology), by reflections on personal agency in the face of disaster (*moral* meanings), or considerations of what future rising sea level may have in store for low-lying coastal cities such as Amsterdam (*anagogical* meanings). The most striking element is the way in which *De ondergang van Amsterdam* interrogates ways in which possible urban destruction can be framed and visualised, and the implications for how media images, paintings, and formal features of the graphic novel – including the structuring of the panels – produce allegorical associations of images of flood and urban destruction.

4.1 *Mise-en-abyme: Ways of Seeing Urban Destruction*

The importance of ways of seeing and framing is initiated in the opening panels, which introduce the protagonist at the iconic Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, contemplating a 1630 painting by Rembrandt that depicts the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah in turn is contemplating the destruction of Jerusalem. In their study of the graphic novel, Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey note that focalization – the ‘who is seeing what’ – in the graphic novel can be ‘very multilayered’ and ‘open to embedded structures’ (Baetens & Frey 2015: 146). The *mise-en-abyme* structure in the opening panels of *De ondergang van Amsterdam* is particularly complex (the external focalizer seeing Julius seeing Jeremiah seeing Jerusalem), and gives a first indication that this is a graphic novel keenly interested in how images of urban end-time affect the onlooker, and in how shock and grief may be transmitted by visual means. In Rembrandt’s painting, the destruction of the city itself is not shown: the powerful, if enigmatic, expression on Jeremiah’s face instead suggests the impact of wholesale destruction on contemporaries, and invites the onlooker also to contemplate a relationship to a wrathful God and the prospects of redemption (respectively, *spiritual* and *anagogical* planes of meaning).

Most fascinating in van Driel’s treatment of Rembrandt’s painting is how it reflects on viewers’ or readers’ possibilities to gain access to what is depicted. The frames of the first panels that depict Rembrandt’s painting are analogous with,

but not completely identical to, those of the original painting (6, panels 2 and 3), and the musings of Titus relate in part to whether the perspective of the onlooker (that of Titus, but by analogy also that of the reader) can ever be coeval with that of the character within the storyworld. Is it possible for them to momentarily coincide?²⁴ Titus at first doubts such correspondences; he muses: ‘zelfs de lijst is mooi’ – ‘maar het eigenlijke onderwerp, iemand die zijn stad ten onder ziet gaan, kan ik mij daar iets bij voorstellen? / Nauwelijks’ (6, panel 3).²⁵

Van Driel uses the structure of successive panels to suggest how the reader’s and his main character’s perspective may nevertheless briefly coincide. The focalization in the first six panels first turns around Titus, then veers behind him, zooming in on the back of his head, and then focusing ahead to the painting as he sees it in front of him (5, panels 1, 2, and 3; 6, panels 1, 2, and 3; see Image 1). The panels provide a quick succession of different formal strategies of the graphic novel to present subjective perception. They start with two ‘gaze images’ (‘showing a character looking at something’; Mikkonen 2017: 165–166), followed by two ‘over-the-shoulder images’, and then ending with two point-of-view images (‘the impression that the reader shares the field of vision with a particular character’; *ibid.*). Together, the panels constitute what is called an ‘eyeline image/match cut’, ‘a combination of a gaze image that is preceded or followed by a point-of-view image’ (*ibid.*). They gradually zoom in on the painting representing Jeremiah, an image which in itself is yet another graphic form of subjective perception, ‘the reaction image’, which present ‘a character reacting to what he has just seen’ (*ibid.*), and which, ‘[s]imilar to the gaze image, [...] draws our attention to perception’ (*ibid.*). The effect is to actively invite the reader of van Driel’s panels to align their vision with that of Titus. The consecutive panels result in a complex vision not of the destruction of a city but of the view of ‘someone who sees the destruction of his city’ in a way that is acutely aware of how modes of framing and focalization structure the effect on the onlooker.

One of the most powerful juxtapositions of visual framing of destruction in the graphic novel appears when Titus visits his friend Robbie, who repeatedly entertains Titus with gloomy predictions of the end of the world. In a drawn-out conversation with Titus, Robbie predicts the end of Amsterdam: ‘Ik zeg je, binnen twintig jaar is Amsterdam verzwolgen door de zee’ (16).²⁶ When visiting Robbie’s apartment, Titus is struck by the framed images on the wall of Robbie’s home, bird-view images of inundated houses in the wake of hurricanes Katrina (2005). Robbie says he uses them to prepare for the future: ‘In de krant lees ik dat wij Hollanders het water weer moeten leren vrezen. Nou jongen, ik ben alvast begonnen. Door naar zulke foto’s te kijken hou ik mezelf scherp’ (33).²⁷

24 Similar questions have in recent literature been notably explored in the work of Ben Lerner who, in *10:04* (2014) – also a flood novel – used photographs to achieve (or question) the possibility of a coeval presence of narrator and reader.

25 ‘even the frame [of the painting] is beautiful’ – ‘but the topic itself, someone who sees the destruction of his city – is this something I can imagine? / Hardly.’

26 ‘I tell you, within 20 years Amsterdam will be gobbled up by the sea.’

27 ‘In the papers I read that we Dutchmen will have to learn again how to fear the water. You know, lad, I’ve started already. By watching these photos I keep myself ready.’



IMAGE 1 Titus in front of Rembrandt's painting 'Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem' (6, panels 1 and 2).

Again, a subjectifying perspective is produced by the formal strategy of an 'eyeline image/match cut', which moves from a view of a character looking (33, panel 2) to what a character sees (33, panel 3; see Image 2). In the point-of-view panel, the frame of the newspaper photograph of the flooded landscape and the frame of the panel almost coincide. In a gesture that breaks through these embedded frames, part of Robbie's hand cuts both frames, strongly suggestive of a point-of-view perspective (this time that of Robbie), poignantly drawing the reader towards a closer examination of the flood imagery.

The elevated point of view of the images on Robbie's wall is a perspective that has become dominant in media representations of disaster, from aerial pictures of flooded areas and animated heat maps over the arctic to future shifts in shore lines, but also a view that has become criticized for its distancing aesthetics (see Dobraszcyk 2017). The clippings resonate with a number of other, similar images in van Driel's graphic novel: Joost Pollmann notices that the metal lids of the trash bins seen from Titus's window resemble the flooded rooftops of New Orleans – one of many subtle visual signals (Pollmann 2007). Such visual resonance between similar images constitute a formal strategy particular for the graphic novel: 'the recurrence of [...] emblems' which effects the 'texturing of intrigue' and which 'produces rhymes and remarkable configurations', an associative structure which comics theorist Thierry Groensteen calls 'procedures of braiding' (2007: 128, 131). But for the reader, the images on Robbie's wall resonate not only with similar visual structures within the book, but also with other images that have become part of the national iconography, and more particularly with the images of

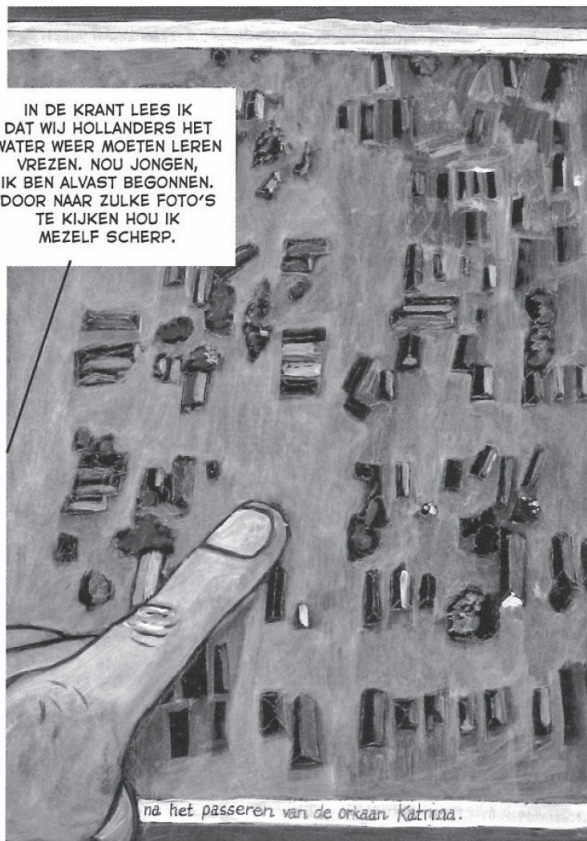


IMAGE 2 Image of Katrina on the wall of Robbie's room. The newspaper photograph caption reads 'After the passing of Katrina'.

rooftops in the wake of the 1953 flood. Within *De ondergang van Amsterdam*, the post-Katrina images interact suggestively also with bird-views of Amsterdam, in particular those of the two-page panels on the pages 24-25 and 26-27, inviting the reader to imagine the effect of possible flooding on Amsterdam – in Robbie's words: 'Zie je het al voor je, de Ferdinand Bolstraat of de Van Woustraat waarin het water twee meter hoog staat?' (33).²⁸ Echoing Titus's thoughts on viewing Rembrandt's *Jeremiah* – is this something I can imagine? – Robbie's words question whether, and how, we are able to imagine such urban destruction.

Throughout *De ondergang van Amsterdam*, van Driel offers other perspectives as complementary to the bird view, some from slightly elevated position (such as Titus's window view), many of them directed to other humans at eye level, sometimes with a character directly gazing at the reader (as in encounters in the tram; 23, panel 2). This latter perspective, the direct gaze, can be considered as the equivalent of addressing the reader with 'you', a visual technique that 'can also increase narrativity by suggesting a heightened level of involvement for the reader' (Mikkonen 2017: 167). As in *Tsunami in de Amstel*, the gaze is not free from sexualiz-

²⁸ 'Can you see it before your eyes, the Ferdinand Bolstraat or the Van Woustraat with the water two meters high?'

ing and objectifying tendencies, but van Driel's way of juxtaposing different images explicitly foregrounds this problematic dimension of the gendered gaze, for example when Titus uneasily moves from admiring Rembrandt's titillating painting of a bathing woman (Rembrandt's concubine Hendrickje) to a peepshow in Amsterdam's red light district (41-48).

4.2 *Unreal Flooding*

From the peepshow begins an increasingly unreal sequence that ends with the flooding of Amsterdam. In a nightmarish vision, Titus notices Abe Lincoln (or a figure resembling him), then follows him to the industrial harbour and sees him depart in a zeppelin. As Titus walks home, he realizes that water is welling up from underneath him, rapidly flooding the city. A possible *moral* reading of the flood is suggested by how different characters react to the urgent danger for themselves and others. Titus's friend Robbie, who repeatedly emphasizes his unique preparedness for future disaster (he carries a life jacket wherever he goes and has a rubber boat in his apartment) is seen safe and sound in his rubber boat (62-63), with a thoughtful expression and pose reminiscent of that of Jeremiah in Rembrandt's painting (62, panel 3). But amidst the human suffering around him, Robbie's success at survival stands out as an image of selfish indifference. The reader is more likely to identify with Titus, who, by contrast, dives in the water to save a child he sees drowning in a submerging car (64, panels 1-4).

There are several moments in the graphic novel that can be interpreted as setting in motion the flood: strange things start happening from the moment Titus lights a joint (35; possible hallucination); it starts to rain incessantly (from p. 37 onward); there is a possible turning point when Titus finds a strange polaroid photo of a young girl, which produces a disturbing chain of associations with Rembrandt's bathing woman and the women in the red light district, with a possible suggestion of retribution for personal sinfulness. An *anagogical* dimension, with the flood contextualized as a flood of sin caused by neo-liberal hubris, and looking forward to future destruction, is suggested in the very first, motto-like, panel of the book, in which Robbie contextualizes the coming end by critiquing unlimited growth narratives: 'Kijk, als de winst van dit jaar groter moet worden dan de winst van vorig jaar en dat ieder jaar opnieuw... Dat is toch een hysterisch krankjorum uitgangspunt' (4).²⁹ And there are several gestures towards ecological and climatological uneasiness and unseasonable weather: Titus notices that the narcissus flowers are already blooming in February (19), a theme which the book returns to in its final pages. *De ondergang van Amsterdam* ends with the protagonist waking up from what appears to have been a nightmare or hallucination. The storm at night has sent a magpie's nest tumbling from a tree. But the protagonist sees hope in this small scene of destruction: the birds will be able to build a new nest with the flotsam from the old one, suggesting nature's resilience and the relative insignificance of human suffering.

²⁹ 'Look, if the profit of this year has to be bigger than the profit of last year and then every year again... that's a hysterically crazy perspective.'

With this measure of closure, it also becomes possible to reflect on the kinds of visions that may enable one to prepare for the experiences of destruction and re-birth in this graphic novel. For Robbie, bird-view images of catastrophic flood in far-of places provide a degree of preparation. But what most intrigues Titus is the face of an unknown other, observed up-close – as in the sight of the prophet Jeremiah in Rembrandt's opening painting.

5 Conclusion

Tsunami in de Amstel and *De ondergang van Amsterdam* adopt the trope of the flood in ways that are open to a range of allegorical readings. In both texts, allegory remains ultimately indeterminate. It is possible to read the descriptions of the flood in *literal* terms (as accurate descriptions of occurrences in the storyworld, or as hallucination); in *spiritual* terms (with repercussions for how the belief-system functions); in *moral* terms (with suggestions for how to act); as well as in *anagogical* terms (concerning what to expect from the future). In Boskma's treatment of the flood trope, *moral* meanings remain at the background, in part because the flood in *Tsunami in de Amstel* is not presented as a disaster: there are no casualties to be helped or choices to be made to avert catastrophe. In Van Driel's treatment, moral meanings are more clearly foregrounded, both on the level of personal action (Titus' rescuing of the child) as well as in the way the narration considers how to prepare for possible futures by taking particular perspectives: a distanced bird-view, face-to-face interaction, and the endeavour to imagine someone else's point of view. In both texts, one reading that is particularly productive in relation to the respective formal features of the works is that of the flood as akin to human consciousness bursting outside of its boundaries and the restrictions of form, and suggestive of the affordances and limits of the chosen form or genre. *Tsunami in de Amstel* shows how the artist, like an unbound river, '[...] buiten modes en conventies treden kan, / op onbekend terrein waar hij alleen maar vrij kan zijn' (71),³⁰ and the flood waters that drown Amsterdam spell the title of the very poem we are reading (82). The literary form of Boskma's collection, which moves from shorter, lyrical poems to the unusual form of the long epic poem in iambic heptameters, suggests an analogy with such breaching of boundaries. In *De ondergang van Amsterdam*, the workings of an over-sensitive consciousness are analogous with the play on frames, with van Driel's use of panels which overlap almost, but not completely, with the frames of pictures, paintings, and photos, adverting the reader to the possibility of adopting the perspective of someone else, as Titus imagines doing in front of Rembrandt's 'Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem'.

Playfulness of form, and the dialectic between different temporalities and different forms of visualization, interrogate the possibilities of the reader to gain access to a volatile world that is presented as being set on a course to destruction. In Boskma's text, the potential presence of the reader is linked with the possibility to participate in the ritualistic properties (as outlined by Culler) of lyrical po-

30 'can move beyond fads and conventions / on unknown terrain where he can be only free'.

etry, and in how they can participate in producing lyrical enunciations in a way that is coeval with the lyric I, or to identify with the addressee. In Boskma's poetics, that enunciative function has demiurgic, world-creative properties, the power to awaken a world into being by the act of naming, as in the poem 'Zonder Titel' (25). For all its metric prowess, the final, epic part, by contrast, evacuates such immediacy of presence. 'Tsunami in de Amstel', if anything, sketches the limits of the epic, narrative poem in contemporary treatment.

In van Driel's *De ondergang van Amsterdam*, the possibility of presence is one of aligning different perspectives and competing visualizations, and announced in the intricate mise-en-abyme in the opening panels: the protagonist looks at a painting to make sense of possible future destruction, while we as readers look at him, invited to consider both the possibility of destruction and the extent to which visual or narrative interpretations can give us access to possible future destruction. In the form of his graphic novel, then, van Driel has provided a tentative answer to the question Titus starts out from, in front of Rembrandt's painting of the destruction of Jeruzalem: 'kan ik mij daar iets bij voorstellen?' (6) – 'is this something I can imagine?'

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