

# Hans Anten

## **“A book such as ‘Automobile’ is only written once in a lifetime”. Ilja Ehrenburg’s *The life of the automobile* as benchmark in the discussion of New Objectivity in Dutch literature**

*Abstract*

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During the first half of the 1930s various novels appeared in Dutch literature representing the movement called New Objectivity. In their discussions of this movement one publication above all is used by critics of all persuasions to orientate themselves: *The life of the automobile* by the Russian author Ilja Ehrenburg. It is this ‘industrial novel’ which had become the benchmark in any appraisal of New Objectivity. This contribution will not only explore the way Ehrenburg’s *Automobile* functioned as a standard in the reception of New Objectivity novels; in order to be able to understand why this novel could take on this role, attention will be paid to the generally very positive reviews accorded him because of *Automobile*, as well as the sudden critical reversal when he began to publish novels that copied the format of *Automobile*. Various factors have contributed to the great enthusiasm with which *Automobile* was received. Chief among these are that for years already there had been calls for the renewal of prose, that there had been pleadings to recognise journalism as a valid literary genre, that the new medium of artistic cinema provoked fascination, that there was social debate about the relation of technology to society, and last but not least, the fact that Ehrenburg was Russian and therefore represented new Revolutionary Russia for which interest was also at a peak. At the beginning of this contribution each of these factors will be examined. The chapter will be rounded off with a short account of Ehrenburg’s afterlife in Dutch periodicals when *Automobile* and New Objectivity had already disappeared from the literary repertoire.

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