

## Jury report

### KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize 2026 – Cultural studies

**Rahel Koch, MSc, Maastricht University**

*Pharmaceuticalizing thinness: The social construction of Ozempic*

Geachte aanwezigen, dear audience,

The members of this year's jury for the Jan Brouwer Thesis Prize for Cultural studies assessed 27 interesting theses, that were of a qualitatively high level. I recollect that juries in the years before us reached the same conclusion. This means that cultural studies in the Netherlands consistently demonstrate a high standard. A nice observation to be able to make.

Members of this year's jury were Wim van Anrooij, Claes de Vreese, and Anthonya Visser. They thoroughly discussed the nominations sent in by colleagues from seven different universities. We would like to express our gratitude to those supervisors who took the trouble to write nomination letters for the theses they felt met the criteria of this prize. The topics represented in the nominated work could hardly have diverged more widely; they varied from the poetics of war, or Surinam Plantation Ecologies, to letter racks by 17th century painter Samuel van Hoogstraten. Something that really stood out – and seems to be in line with the current zeitgeist – was the number of theses that explicitly stated that the starting point for the research was personal experiences or the researchers' own biographical backgrounds.

If the sole criterion had been the quality of the thesis, it might have been impossible to reach a unanimous decision among the jury. However, considering that the prize-winning thesis should preferably reflect an interdisciplinary and society-oriented research project, this simplified our choice somewhat. Unanimously, we concluded that Rahel Koch is this year's winner! Koch absolved the Research Master Arts and Culture, with a specialization in Cultures of Arts, Science and Technology in the nominal period of two years. Her grades were consistently high. What is more, her cv shows a broad interest in research, design and AI – domains in which she has gained extracurricular working experience.

Koch's thesis, *Pharmaceuticalizing thinness: The social construction of Ozempic*, researches the social construction of the diabetes medication ingredient semaglutide (known as Ozempic and Wegovy) as a weight-loss drug. In doing so, Koch considers socio-cultural notions of self-optimization, healthism, and medicalization in a US-discourse between 2017 and 2025 in which thinness is made the norm to conform to. Looking through a social constructivist lens, Koch identifies social actors, rhetorical choices, and cultural contexts that made the reframing of semaglutide as a weight-loss drug so successful. The thesis offers an enormous amount of information while remaining pleasant to read. Koch's formulations are precise, her analyses rich, and she engages a substantial body of secondary literature, integrating it seemingly effortlessly into the argument. Koch demonstrates an impressive level of expertise in a rigorously conducted research project, including the collection and selection of material as well as the methodological and theoretical choices, which are well substantiated.

The jury was unanimously delighted with this work, which shows the value and urgency of truly interdisciplinary research. Koch demonstrates that interdisciplinarity means that the starting point of a project – the question one seeks to answer – requires input from different disciplines. The topic of this prize-winning thesis is not grounded in medical sciences, social sciences or the humanities alone; it requires a thorough understanding of data from all those fields. It is commendable that Rahel Koch possesses the capacity to do this.

To summarize, the jury is convinced that Rahel Koch is this year's deserved winner of the 'Jan Brouwer Scriptieprijs voor Cultuurwetenschappen'! All scholars in the humanities, as well as representatives of society at large gathered here today, witness through her exemplary thesis the need for—and urgency of—an SSH perspective on societal questions that, at first sight, may seem medical (or, in other cases, technical) in nature.

*Prof. dr. W. (Wim) van Anrooij, emeritus-hoogleraar Nederlandse letterkunde tot de Romantiek Universiteit Leiden*

*Prof. dr. C.H. (Claes) de Vreese, universiteitshoogleraar Artificial Intelligence and Society Universiteit van Amsterdam*

*Prof. dr. A. (Anthonya) Visser, decaan Faculteit der Letteren, hoogleraar Europese literatuur en cultuur, i.h.b. de Duitse, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*

The online meeting of the jury, chaired by KHMW social member drs. M. (Marjan) Scharloo, took place on December 12th, 2025. Also present at the meeting was prof. dr. W.B. (Wim) Drees, academic secretary for the social sciences and humanities of the KHMW.