



Lecture Series: New Developments in Theory

# A POLITICS OF READING

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**21 MAY 2019, 6–8pm**

Englisches Seminar, Grosser Hörsaal  
Nadelberg 6, Basel

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READING IS THE PRIMARY ACTIVITY in any engagement with literature in its Western, post-Gutenberg form. Its political stakes have been central to literary theory and the discipline of Comparative Literature at least since the 1980s. With Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and the cultural criticism of the Birmingham School, the politics of *representation* became a central concern to literary study. By now, literature is taken almost paradigmatically as a "worldly" (in Said's sense) artefact emmeshed in distributions of power, which can be read for the socio-political regimes of knowledge it displays and co-creates. In recent years, reading has also been the contentious key-term by which especially the discipline of Comparative Literature battles over its future methodological framework. Shall this be close, contrapuntal, symptomatic, distant, or surface reading? Will CompLit become WorldLit? Or is comparative literature dead anyway? In these questions, the discipline's own ideological presuppositions are on the line. The politics of the discipline are negotiated here by way of reading.

My talk intervenes in these recent debates and explores reading as a necessarily collective practice, always in language(s) and involving a *polis* of some sort. Reading-events exceed the bilateral, silent interaction between reader and text, between presumably stable subjects and objects of study, which continue to underlie close or distant, contrapuntal or surface reading. What might we gain from considering such reading-events not as receptive, but as diffractive? How are reader, text, environment and reading material-semiotically entangled in such ways that a reading-event is not only an individual experience of non-appropriable alterity and the limits of the Subject (Attridge), but that it onto-epistemologically summons or fabricates a situational *polis* which involves and transforms reader and text (Rosenblatt)? In that light, my talk pursues less an ethics than a (micro)politics of reading. It is interested in the constitutive limitations, appetitions and in/exclusions that enact the mattering agential cuts (Barad) in literary reading-events, beyond established forms of representation. Importantly, the new materialist suggestion of diffractive reading must be accompanied by its own theory of ideology (Spivak), to avoid rushing too quickly "beyond" a reading subject and thereby foreclosing the persistently decisive question that postcolonial criticism has put on the agenda for any intra-active worlding: who reads what for-with-through-by whom, where, when and with which stakes?

BIRGIT MARA KAISER is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Transcultural Aesthetics at Utrecht University. She studied sociology and literature in Bochum, Bielefeld, Madrid and London, and holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from New York University. Her research spans literatures in English, French and German from the 19th century to the present, with special interest in aesthetics, affect and subject-formation. She also publishes in the fields of postcolonial literary studies and feminist new materialism. Publications include *Figures of Simplicity. Sensation and Thinking in Kleist and Melville* (SUNY 2011), *Singularity and Transnational Poetics* (Routledge 2015) and most recently *Diffracted Worlds – Diffractive Readings: Onto-Epistemologies and the Critical Humanities* (with K. Thiele, Routledge 2018). She is also editor (with K. Thiele and T. O'Leary) of the book series *New Critical Humanities* (Rowman & Littlefield Int.) and founding coordinator (with K. Thiele) of the interdisciplinary research network *Terra Critica*.