

The Heterogeneous Historicity of Reading: Analysing Weak Analogies of Relation and Comparison in Twentieth-Century Literature

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My talk focuses on the challenges posed to conceptual and methodological approaches to comparative literature by the increasing awareness that globalization has given of the heterogeneity of reading contexts. The expanding and diversifying contemporary readerships demand that comparative literature focus more attention on specific effects that occur when literary narratives meet readerships that do not share the same historical imagery. By discussing briefly the relationship between Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) and W. G. Sebald (1944-2001), two writers who emigrated to Britain from Central Europe and wrote transnational histories of imperialism at the opposite ends of the twentieth century, I will show how comparative literature could contextualize the works of these transnational authors in ways that go beyond the idea of a “punctual” relationship of a literary text to historical context and beyond positing one implied audience or a coherent horizon of expectation. My paper highlights how these authors’ poetic strategies, which rely on stylistic, informational, and sensory gaps of various sorts, mobilize the historical imagination of embodied and situated readers to match their specific projects of historical orientation. I demonstrate how understanding the complex historicity of the works of these authors requires an analysis that identifies various implied, unimplied and unwelcome reading positions, and differentiates between ways in which active and historically situated readers engage with gaps in literary texts. I will ultimately argue that capturing the manifestations of entangled histories of imperialism in works by these authors and in their reception can be approached through comparative methods that are based not on comparison of fixed national literatures and cultures, but on a comparison of incommensurable but still linked reading positions, which are incommensurable due to their differing positions in the hierarchical legacies of imperialism.