

THINKING – RESISTING – READING THE POLITICAL

WIDERSTÄNDIGES DENKEN – POLITISCHES LESEN

What perspectives and methods does advanced cultural theory offer for our attempts to grasp political discourse and analyze aesthetic treatments and performances of resistance? The international conference THINKING – RESISTING – READING THE POLITICAL brings together scholars from the fields of theatre, literature, art and media studies, from cultural theory, sociology, and philosophy, to discuss possibilities and limits of current models and attempt new approaches. The deliberately ambiguous German title exemplifies the bidirectional design: ‘widerständiges denken’ refers both to manners of thinking resistance, and to the search for a quality of resistance in manners of thought. Similarly, ‘politisches lesen’ intends both the search for a political element in dispositions towards reading, and that for an adequate disposition to read for an element of the political. In what theoretically describable forms of thought can resistance appear, and how can resistance be thought of as an object of theory? How can the political mark certain texts, and what procedures are available for a reading that is marked by an appropriate sensibility for the contents and orders of the political?

The conference will aim not only to continue a critical reflection upon the proposals offered by current theories, but to constantly accompany that reflection with a conscious question as to the specific consequences that flow from these theories to the practice of cultural study and the analysis of individual and concrete pieces of art; a question that might well have to be answered in the negative, but deserves an explicit answer nevertheless. Can there be *methods* for a scholarly sound reading of the political? Is the activity of dealing with always already elusive and thus doubly resistant categories at all graspable in terms of methods or techniques? And whatever the answer may be, can it in turn help us to better understand common suppositions of methodology and contribute to a productive argument on what a method is?

Theory, art and feuilleton have all seen claims towards an ‘ethical’ or ‘political turn’ in recent years, drawing additional attention to variations of politics in cultural studies and reintroducing corresponding terminology into academic discourse. Speculations about an assumed basic quality of resistance in an artist’s practice, and a political significance at the foundation of art, literature, cinema, TV, and theatre abound. However, with an aim to better understand, clearly describe and critically discuss such concepts of a political dimension in

aesthetics, the talks at this conference should look at those facets of the ‘political’ that have been problematized in theories of radical democracy and recent philosophical treatments of politics: At phenomena, that is, that depend upon their fundamental incommensurability with representations and institutions, with stable notions of political order and uninterrupted political discourse. Such interpretations distance themselves from a simple equation of political reading with an interest in politically engaged, appellative texts and literatures that support or accuse specific party politics or revolutionary programs; nor does their focus rest on purely literary treatments of categorical de- and re-differentiation in established political discourse, as they are discussed in postcolonial, gender and minority studies among others. Rather, the political is here intended as a complementary and opposing concept to that of politics (La Mouffe, Laclau), confronting that incoherence that balances the politics of coherent commonality and communicability in favor of conflicting political autonomy and enunciation.

So far, the demands and possibilities of these concepts have rarely been fulfilled or even systematically considered in cultural studies. The possible objects of an analysis informed by these approaches include intersections of such a political element with moments of sensual and medial perception, of art and aesthetics in production, reception, and commentary. We believe that one departure that has shed some important light on these issues is the discussion of Jacques Rancière’s idea of the ‘aesthetic regime of art’, a historical *a priori* forming and ordering thoughts about and in the arts predominantly since the 18th century. Rancière’s terms circumvent the distinctions of semiotically oriented media studies focused on technological or cognitive dispositives, as well as empirical mainstays of communication studies and sociology, and arrive at a productive alternative: Conceiving the qualities of the sayable and unsayable, the visible and the invisible as differences separate from the limits of material apparatus or exterior senses, we may demand of aesthetics some insight into a ‘politics’ that interrupts the established distributions of the sensible of an ordering ‘police’, and its resistant dimension. In this way, the difference of politics and police may be refined as a separation between a ‘distribution’ (partage) of the sensible, allowing representation and ultimately representative party politics, and a ‘disagreement’ (mésentente), introducing a basic dissent concerning that order of the perceivable, thinkable and utterable.

Returning to an interest in the political, we thus propose to accompany such interests with an intention towards theoretical conceptions, and to openly examine if and how that intention might translate into specific analytic or descriptive measures: The conference will discuss the problematic ‘consequences in methodology’ attributed to these theories from a number of different vantage points. This interdisciplinary and international exchange of ideas will take its departure from the philosophical reflections of Rancière and is open for further

perspectives arising from reconstructions of Badiou, Blanchot or Nancy as well as considerations of Hamacher or Žižek, considerations of the relation between ethics and politics in Critchley, and of the ambivalent notion of community in Esposito. The interdisciplinary setup will hopefully provide opportunities to productively discuss theories of various provenience and to grapple with works of art and individual analyses, examining, defending or rejecting the possibility of a methodology informed by advanced theory.

For this discussion, single political utterances are of less interest than the search for sustainable concepts of the political as such. The debate of concurrent political issues will be secondary to debating the conditions of possibility for a political quality in works of art; the refinement of general concepts of resistant art will likewise be backgrounded in favor of an examination of speculative theory in terms of its consequences for the practice of cultural studies. Contributions therefore might address topics such as the following, among others:

- discussing the productivity of philosophical distinctions along the lines of politics and the political, or police and politics, for grasping political dimensions of current aesthetics;
- examining the genesis of models of thought and fundamental assumptions from which theoretical designs of the political in aesthetics have historically emerged;
- communicating recent claims in theories approaching or in turn denying a political dimension to art;
- developing and criticizing methodological bases for a study of literature, theatre, media and art informed by the thought of these theories;
- analyzing the details of new formats and individual pieces of art in which the political can, has been, should or should not be thought or read.

Talks are welcome in German and English; if possible, English is preferred.