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## Against Totality: Reading for Intermedial Literary Constellations (Abstract)

- Full-length article in: JLT 7/1-2 (2013), 64–85.

In this article I assume that the writing of literary historiographies is inextricably bound up with questions of comparison. On a macroscopic level, literary historians circa 1800 began to consider texts as expressive of a national imaginary and the modern nation-state. At the same time, the alternative notion of a world literature emerged. Under the current research agendas of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and transnationalism, which dominate North American literary studies and comparative literary studies in the U.S., the notions of the nation and the world are transposed to various understandings of the planetary and to the representation of differential identity scripts, which inform contemporary attempts of rewriting literary histories. In this essay I discuss two complementary interventions by Franco Moretti and Gayatri Spivak who represent two divergent positions but who both understand the task of writing literary histories as one of the complete assessment of the literatures of the world. These macroscopic literary historiographies are problematic insofar as they have to foreclose an understanding of literary texts as singular events. In order to conceptualize a less taxonomic frame of comparison, which is centered on close readings from within and against discursive constraints and categories, I suggest a return to Theodor Adorno's concept of the constellation. While he initially understood it as a mode of interpretive philosophy, it also offers a method of reading for intermedial literary constellations – a microscopic foil to the literary historiographies of planetary totality.

In a first step, the essay offers a discussion of the approaches by Franco Moretti and Gayatri Spivak. While both approaches mark two divergent ends of the New Left, they share the assumption that a comparative literary historiography under the contemporary telos of the planetary should strive for a complete assessment of the literatures of the world. In his Stanford Literary Lab and in various publications, Moretti suggests the practice of distant reading. From within an analysis of world systems, he conceptualizes this practice as a transfer of quantitative methods from the natural and social sciences to literary studies. The historiographies Moretti thus produces focus on indicators such as genres and tropes. His deliberate mobilization of the natural and social sciences comes at the calculated cost of surrendering a former core competency of literary studies, close reading, that Moretti, in a puzzling assessment, still takes to be the common, institutionalized practice in U.S. humanities. I contend that in striving for a complete taxonomy and in catering to the tropes and models of representation of the presumably »hard« sciences, Moretti follows a principle of the accumulation of data. In doing so, he ultimately naturalizes the parameters he uses to organize literary histories. By contrast, Spivak, who partly argues against Moretti in *Death of a Discipline*, wants to renovate the discipline of comparative literature by linking the practice of close reading in the original language with a postcolonial redirecting of Area Studies. I contend that, at closer inspection, her account not only perpetuates an already institutionalized and intentional politics of corrective or resistant rewriting, which endows the position of the postcolonial critic and writer with a privileged position of subversion based upon strategically reclaimed identity scripts; structurally, it also functions analogous to Moretti. Both follow a principle of accumulation and want to chart the planetary in its totality: Moretti by assuming stable generic categories and tropological

structures, Spivak by naturalizing the link between the mastery of original languages and the acquisition of an irreducible totality of differential identity scripts.

In a second step, my essay suggests an alternative way of writing literary historiographies, which retrieves another end of the New Left: Theodor Adorno's concept of the constellation, which he understood as a mode of interpretive philosophy, and which I re-conceptualize as a reading for intermedial constellations. Writing against scientific positivism, Adorno rejects identification, representativeness, and totality, and instead privileges nonidentity, representability, and the constellation. His self-reflective approach focuses on the conditions of the modes of inquiry itself, while upholding the notion of artworks as singular events, which should be assessed from within and against institutionalized narratives and discursive constraints. Such an interpretive philosophy undermines the correspondence between question and answer, between a receptive expectation and its fulfillment. Transposed onto the reading of literary texts, it remains open for the possibility that literary fictions, while embedded in social scripts, may gesture toward positions of singularity and individual authorship, which cut across these scripts and the conventions of reception they establish. Constructing the concept of an intermedial constellation, I read the opening scene of Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* as the negotiation of a *Künstlerroman*, a contemporary novel of the arts, from within and against the confines of the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. Kincaid's novel reconciles artistic modernism by entering an intermedial, ekphrastic constellation, which foregrounds the conditions of representability (The Brooklyn Bridge as dramatized in the works of Hart Crane, Frank Stella, and Walker Evans) rather than that which is represented. In doing so, *Lucy* demands the construction of a contemporary literary constellation, which arranges literary texts according to their investment in artistic forms instead of their presumed representative speaker position. Its formal investment thus demands the re/writing of at least two literary historiographies at once: a reconciliatory tracing of the legacy of artistic modernism that, at the same time, effectuates a critique of a contemporary literary historiography according to the tenets of U.S. literary postcolonialism and multiculturalism.

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2014-02-25

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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**How to cite this item:**

Abstract of: Florian Sedlmeier, Against Totality: Reading for Intermedial Literary Constellations.

In: JLTONline (25.02.2014)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-002548

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-002548>