

*Descriptive Comment*

First blog entry by Silke Schmidt

Thoughts and feelings keep circulating in our soul for a long time. They awaken this inner longing to express them. Especially for those among us who do not only write academically but from the heart, this expression needs to flow in the form of writing. Yet, we hesitate. We want to let it out but we push it off. We have no time – we think. We try to ignore it because it keeps us from pursuing our daily scholarly tasks – we believe. However, we are wrong in believing that these moves of ignorance make the thoughts and feelings disappear. They haunt us. They do not ease. Increasingly, we start recognizing the exact same thing that has been on our mind for so long in small and large incidents in our everyday practice. In the lecture hall, at a meeting, in talks with students and colleagues – frequently we pause for a moment and think that what we have just experienced is another incidence of THIS THOUGHT that we have been carrying around. Then we violently step out of this moment of reflection again to get back to our routine. We do not allow small projects to distract us from the big project we are pursuing – the big project of working toward tenure, of becoming great scholars, bright intellectuals. We know exactly what it takes for this, i.e., long and short publications, conferences, teaching experience, administration. Thereby, we try to kill all the small projects getting in the way. The small projects so much occupy our minds that they do not allow us to sleep when day turns into night. Somewhere within, we know that these nightmares are exactly the ones that would make us grow intellectually more than anything else. More than any single book or article we read, more than any talk we listen to. But we fight this off. Bit by bit, these thoughts pile up, just like putting old boxes and furniture into the basement storage room. At a certain point, the storage room starts living a life of its own. It becomes an

incubator. Previously disconnected elements become convoluted, inseparable. They aggregate. They become bigger. And all of a sudden, all it takes is an event, a particular single incident, the cat jumping on one of the boxes in the basement, which makes everything explode. This incident, this EXPERIENCE of SEEING, takes us by the hand and accompanies us to our desk. In a trance state of mind, no matter if day or night, we push the start button of our computer, open the white sheet of electronic paper and start typing.

You might think this is the beginning of a freakish novel on academic life. Actually, it is not. It is the true story behind this blog which you are just reading. To give you the raw data right away: woman, young scholar, 30 years old, born and raised in Germany, traveled half the planet by myself, dropped in and out of academia frequently, still managed to get my PhD quicker than many others, worked as a PR and business consultant in-between, love gardening and house repair tasks, have a passion for languages, love and hate scholarship like a drug addict, went through several phases of academic-related depression and breakdowns already, intensive identity changes, androgynous appearance – a chameleon. Now, what the hell does this have to do with *Descriptive Comment* and the revelatory moment described above? Well, let me explain. Here are the different strains that now come together unfolding in front of your eyes which are just following lines which I am just typing. I have been thinking about starting an “academic” blog for a long time now. Reasons: I love the format, I love writing from the heart in moments when writing can react quickly to what happens in the world. I love scholars who give insights into their lives without pretending to be either highly intellectual or incredibly popular. Also, I have followed the news on successful female academic bloggers who encourage other young academics to pursue their careers – no matter what. So, that much on the reasons behind blogging for now. Let’s get to the incubator issue, to the event that finally made me start writing this morning. Actually, there were

two major events. One happened about a week ago. I was at an interdisciplinary conference on identity. Now, no worries, I am going to spare you the details. I am just mentioning it because sitting in the plenary sessions and listening to the discussion of scholars all somehow working in the larger field of cultural studies made me realize how pathetically critically our generation of scholars is, how deeply normative everyone argues whilst critiquing all possible and impossible norms out there. How functional we always approach our research. I know, this sounds quite vague, so let me describe another situation at that conference. One of the presenters on the panel I chaired gave a presentation on (self-)alienation in novels. One of the keynote speakers of the conference was in the audience – a well-known sociologist – later in the Q&A attacked her that the concept of (self-)alienation automatically implies that there is a self in the first place and that her research topic – as an analytical category – in the end does not make any sense (for those among you who like clear language: the expression and emphasis of his words expressed “your concept is BS”) because it does not allow the scholar to critique “capitalist structures in society, heteronormativity, social inequality...” The young panelist was totally unimpressed. Calmly, she repeated the gist of her talk. The keynote asker gave it another attempt to elevate his analytical status and launched the second attack by repeating his comment from before while, in addition, shaking his head and smiling derogatively. The panelist then phrased her statement very clearly: “You know, I am a literary scholar, not a sociologist. I analyze how (self-)alienation is described by the authors in the novels and which role it plays for the protagonists. It is not up to me to critique everything.” Well, I hope I got this account fairly right, but no MLA guidelines on my blog, no worries about plagiarism. I am quoting this to give you the first part of my blog incubator story. In sum, this conversation impressed me so much because it was not merely on self-alienation for me, only in a figurative sense. It shook me deep within because it spelled out my

uneasiness and feeling of alienation from what we as literary and cultural studies scholars are practicing all the time while being proud of it. Everything has to be somehow critical in the functional sense that our theories and findings need to help heal social and political ills. To make it even clearer: nothing is intellectually valid or even scholarly brilliant if it is not somehow anti-capitalist, anti-essentialist, anti-anti-queer... Got it? Still confused about what I actually want to say? Then, here comes the second incident that gave birth to my blogging life. It happened just yesterday.

I was sitting in a seminar on “Religious Practice: Lived Islam.” You might ask what I was doing there in the first place being an Americanist, having worked on Arab American autobiographies for the last years and working on gendered rationality definitions in times of financial crises now. Wrong question to ask, though, and you will find out why in a minute. Anyway, I listened to three wonderful presentations from PhD students with backgrounds in anthropology, sociology and theology. (Stick a mental note to your head now that all these subjects commonly count as “social sciences” practiced by so-called empiricists – this will be essential later on). The first project dealt with religious knowledge constitution in Muslim communities in Germany, the second one with a European Sufi movement and the last one examined the cultural role of Sufism in Lebanon. Let’s get to the conclusion first: the talks were highly ILLUMINATING. They were illuminating in the way that you felt when you listened to childhood fairy tales and could not hold your breath to ask your mom or whoever was reading why the bad wolf had killed the grandma in the little house in the woods, how he did it, why he is wearing grandma’s gown now? It was illuminating in the way you experience conversations where your friend tells you that another friend of yours unexpectedly broke up with her girlfriend. How did it happen? Why? Can it happen to you too? Are you just realizing that these moments of LISTENING and QUESTIONING and burning to get ANSWERS are indeed illuminating in way that

academic talks often are not? You want to know why? I can tell you that much now: they are enlightening because you actually want to KNOW. You ask questions naturally from the bottom of your brain and heart without thinking about whether or not the question is smart because you MUST KNOW. But I want to steer your attention to the process for a moment before returning to the talks on Muslims and Sufis. Your questions arise because you have listened to the STORY first. You listened to a story that was full of little details, scenery, characters, events, feelings... To get where I want to get finally: you were listening to a DESCRIPTION of something, not to an analysis, not to an interpretation or critique. You were listening all this time, the pictures in your mind unfolded and immediately, all the questions to really UNDERSTAND derive. An entirely new world unfolds within seconds. It is talks like the ones I listed to yesterday which make this world unfold. The second presentation, for example, was on the life of a Sufi leader. Many details of his life, e.g., portraits, pictures from archives, where piles of unedited writing are waiting for researchers to touch them for the first time, reports from field trips to adherents of the Sufi movement, a smiling young scholar sharing the little bits and pieces of a research story unfolding as more and more members of the Sufi order were interviewed, as more and more information on the Sufi leader came to light.

Now, you might wonder, fine, so what? This is exactly what happened in the seminar too. We – i.e., young urban scholars educated in the West in the humanities mostly – allow ourselves to simply LISTEN and LEARN but only until that small door of being “carried away” slams shut again. It makes us raise our hand and pose the following question: “Well, thank you for presenting all these intriguing details. What I am just wondering is where do you want to go with this? What is your research PURPOSE? Do you have a thesis?” My stomach was twisted the moment one of the participants actually raised this question. It was almost certain this was going to happen. And you know what? I am not saying this

because I want to judge the person who raised it. Quite the opposite. As a grad student in a classroom situation, only a little while ago, I would have been the first one asking it to demonstrate how well I understand our project as scholars to “dig deeply” into matter and material. This is what all letters of recommendation about me and my work always testified. This is why I was given a chance to start the journey toward SCHOLARSHIP. I always wanted to go somewhere with the thoughts I raised and the texts I read. But do you also slowly get why I felt caught this time? Because I realized that the feeling of illumination just a few minutes before only got me simply because all the expectations of social criticism and analytical sharpness were not filling the room while the girl was giving her presentation. She was DESCRIBING what she had researched and was fascinated by it. As she was saying in her response to the question raised: Her “aim” was to bring “attention to a topic previously not researched.” Getting the point now?

I am starting this blog now because these events made the puzzle pieces fall into place all of sudden. I tried to explain this realization yesterday at the end of the seminar when I raised my hand and said that we as interdisciplinary cultural studies scholars seem to spend so much time on analytical sharpness and target-driven social critique that we forget the very origin of knowledge seeking: to carefully observe and DESCRIBE. To actually open our eyes and look and touch and reveal things nobody ever touched before. We constantly try to develop the 100<sup>th</sup> theory or method to observe a text for the 100<sup>th</sup> time in the history of literary studies from a supposedly new perspective instead of just LOOKING closely without being constantly aware and interrogating our perspective. We question, interpret, judge, theorize... Do we actually LEARN? Do we actually want to KNOW? Exactly these thoughts have been on my mind for years now. I tried to approach them by diving into issue of normativity. In my dissertation, I decided to add an entire chapter on critiquing the continuous habit

of deconstructivist normative criticism in scholarship. This got me closer to where I wanted to get. Then I felt drawn toward the empirical sciences and read a lot about physics because I felt that empirical scholars somehow do something right which cultural studies scholars tend to get wrong, something which bothers me. Physicists, for example, do not care whether the atoms they are observing are gay, capitalists, or right-wing activists. They simply want to observe what happens when atoms interact with atoms of different charging to then compare this with previous findings from different experimental setups. I thought, what intrigued me about this was the lack of normativity involved. Partially, this is right. Normativity plays a big role in the story. But it is not at the core. What is at the core, and this is what I realized yesterday, is the question of METHOD. What is so funny but at the same time boring about this personal illumination is that I used to believe that I was concerned about methodology, empirical approaches to literature, etc. for at least two years now to an extensive degree. And this is all true. I knew that these were things which I increasingly cared about. Just as this concern grew, and notice that the scholarly concern here cannot be separated from a deep struggle with my role and contribution as an academic, I had a brilliant encounter with Heather Love at U Penn. She told me more about her current work on methodology and alternative approaches to reading. She informed me about her work on DESCRIPTION. Although I thought I had a picture of what we were talking about because I had read articles by her and others on the “descriptive turn” in literary studies I know realize that I did not get it. I had read and processed all the information but actually, it took a lot longer to realize the entire magnitude of the matter, of my personal scholarly unrest, of my questioning of the constant questioning and critiquing representatives of my field are engaged in. It took until yesterday to figure out that now I UNDERSTAND what I loved so much about that idea of diving into the issue of DESCRIPTION. I realized that it was description which I was seeking to PRACTICE,

which I myself had lost in my work. At the beginning I had started as an academic outsider from a family where nobody had ever seen a university from the inside ever. But I also started as a child who had learned to listen to stories first and to ask questions second because I wanted to know the answers. Somehow in the process of my academic training this simple process of letting things speak to me before I allow theory to speak back got messed up but the germ of CURIOSITY based on careful and impartial observation was killed fully. On the contrary, now it burst out again with unexpected power. It has always been there underneath the surface of my talks, writings and conversations. Now it has become VISIBLE in a way that I can grasp it and where I desperately seek others to get a hold of it, to possess it and to engage in a dialogue about it.

As you can see, this blog is entitled *Descriptive Comment*. Not a very literary or poetic title – I know. The reason behind the title is that at a certain point I realized that bullshitting with first and good ideas too much makes no sense at all. So, when I decided to start this blog this morning the first title that came to mind was Descriptive Comment and I hold on to it because I have always admired Juan Cole. For those who do not know him: Juan Cole probably is the most famous blogger in the academic world. His blog is named *Informed Comment* in which Cole writes on Middle East affairs from a highly critical perspective. This is not my topic here, sure and I am not presuming to arrive at the level of insightfulness and genius the award-winning Cole stands for. But I am seeking to absorb just a tiny bit of the brevity behind Cole's blogging activities. After all, it was the blog that led to the Yale Controversy with very controversial but for academics quite normal, i.e., non-transparent political bullshit leading to him being refused to teach at Yale. Am I saying I want to go to Yale someday? No, highly unlikely. Am I trying to get myself into trouble? Well, maybe. The aim of this blog is to combine insights into academic life with the question of methodology moving many

of us in literary and cultural studies these days. While we do read, we mostly interpret. For some, this is the ultimate benefit you gain when you reach an education level beyond high school. All the theories and critical strains you learn about become means to approach literature from the high ranks of scholarship. For others, like myself at this stage of my career AND life, this hermeneutical practice of interpretation feels highly unsatisfactory. I feel like I have lost sight of the material I work on. In my professional life as a postdoc in American Studies, this material is LITERATURE. Also from a professional perspective but on a different level, my reading material also is everyday ACADEMIC PRACTICE. This blog is meant to combine insights into both realms by applying and addressing the method of description. As Heather Love in her essay “Close but not Deep” brilliantly traces by drawing on Latour, Goffman and contemporary scholars working on alternative methods of reading (take our your mental note again and find out that these are actually representatives of the very subjects the PhD students I listened to come from), the descriptive turn has a lot to offer by drawing our attention back to close reading while at the same time not going back to the literary stone age of structuralism. By valuing and appreciating description again, both in the material we study as well as in the methods we apply to READ this material, we might arrive at insights which have been buried under the surface of interpretation, political activism and identity politics for a long time.

So, are we making circles then? Is this just a move to revitalize some ancient ideas of scientific objectivity by converting scholars in the humanities into scientific puppets pretending to work in isolated and sterile laboratory cubicles? No. Neither do I have a definite answer to the question of where this might be taking us. The only thing I am convinced of, particularly after working in different interdisciplinary contexts, is that METHOD does shape the way we think in different disciplines. This blog is intended to combine the “how” with the “who.” The aim therefore is to steer a

vivid discussion on method by asking YOU to engage in CLOSE READING of your everyday academic experiences and insights. What I am eager to read on this blog are thorough DESCRIPTIONS of your observations as young or even advanced scholars. The Merriam Webster defines the term description as “discourse intended to give a mental image of something experienced.” This is exactly what I would like to do on this blog and what I would ask you to contribute to our horizon of lived and shared experience. Your descriptions can be short and long, they can be highly intellectual or spontaneous and emotional, in short: they can be of any kind on any thing at any time. This is an experiment on how to arrive at new methods of DESCRIPTION while practicing this method as written EXPERIENCE. Maybe this calling confuses you now. Maybe it makes you angry because you think that you as an academic definitely have a political responsibility to help solve social ills for which description is just a starting point. Maybe you simply hate any sociological approaches to the study of literature. Whatever it is that you see in this account, please describe it. I am eager to see all these descriptions form a colorful quilt of methodological discourse, a testimony to the descriptive turn which might or might not twist the thoughts of our readers to also take part in *Descriptive Comment*.