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berkeleygermanconference@gmail.com

## *Focus in Distraction*

University of California, Berkeley  
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Reading, in an age of digital distractions and mobile devices, is abbreviated and interrupted. In an era that valorizes attention, coherence, focus, and flow, it is more relevant than ever to consider how and why texts emulate, challenge, and are modified by distracted modes of perception. Indeed, what can reading and critical thinking yield in such a state of distraction?

German texts have long invoked various aspects of distraction, whether that of the digressive speaker in medieval poetry, the desultory montage in the *Großstadtroman*, or the interruptive and unsettled life of the modern protagonist. As these instances indicate, distraction is not the mere lack of attention, nor is it necessarily the endpoint or even a part of a spectrum that begins with attention and focus. *Zerstreuung* can describe not just thoughtlessness but a scattered, multidirectional concentration, while *Ablenkung* could refer to the associative process by which psychic free-play turns constructively from one idea to others.

These formulations of distraction have also framed the way that thinkers have written in German about our objects, frames, and modes of analysis, from early modern distinctions between *Zerstreuung* and *Geistesabwesenheit* to the Frankfurt School's disagreements about the nature and politics of media consumption. Perhaps most notably, Siegfried Kracauer critiques the "cult of distraction" induced by mass entertainment, which resonates with the contemporaneous *Kino-Debatte* as well as present-day concerns about deep and hyper-attention. In an age defined by "deficit disorders," then, how might we reevaluate or possibly undermine the long-standing binary between attention and distraction?

Critical thinking and both close and distant reading are practices of attention insofar as they concentrate on a ground against which to make chains of logical claims and avoid being "lost" in a text. Distraction, by contrast, realizes a plurality, heterogeneity, and disparate hierarchy of objects and frames, which raises questions such as: could a distracted mode of reading be a productive intellectual enterprise? What might constitute a poetics of distraction? Analogously, what distinguishes a distracted text, author, reader, narrator, or character, and how can this state of being be interpreted in a wider context?

This conference aims to question critical, popular, aesthetic, scientific, and political narratives of distraction, especially as these have developed in German-speaking countries, with the objective of finding *focus within distraction*. UC Berkeley's Interdisciplinary German Studies Conference invites paper submissions from a range of fields and approaches, including, but not limited to: German studies, comparative literature, film and digital media studies, philosophy, sociology, education and pedagogy, neuroscience, and psychology.

Possible paper topics might include:

- representations of attentive and distracted figures in literature and film
- the impact of attention and distraction on literary forms or genres
- foreground and background in Gestalt theory
- frame theory and modern electronic reading conditions
- constructive distraction (e.g. in pedagogy or across disciplines)
- the geometry and/or economy of metaphors of attention and distraction
- comedy and theories of comedic timing and rhythm
- medical-historical accounts of concentration and inattention
- the politics and techniques of mass manipulation

We welcome submissions, in English or German, for 20-minute presentations. Those wishing to participate should send an abstract, no longer than 300 words, and a CV or brief biographical statement to [berkeleygermanconference@gmail.com](mailto:berkeleygermanconference@gmail.com) by **December 15, 2015**. Presentations should not exceed 20 minutes.