



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

---

## THE FEELING OF THINKING: STORIES AND ANIMATIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF READING THEORY<sup>1</sup>

VERONIKA REICHL AUTHOR AND ARTIST, BASED IN BERLIN

The following stories investigate in experience of reading theory. They are based on 50 interviews with dedicated readers of philosophy (students, lecturers, professors, and others), each focused on their personal reading experiences. Some of the stories refer directly and faithfully to one interview, others combine motifs from different interviews.

The stories are part of an ongoing project: I am writing a whole book of stories on the personal experiences of reading of theory/philosophy. If you would like to share some of your experiences, please contact me (i n f o (at) r e i c h l . n e t). I would love to conduct an email interview with you on your personal reading practice, on the books and authors that influenced you most, on the connection of reading and writing and on changes in your reading practice in the course of time. The interviews are confidential.

Three of the texts are accompanied by short animations, which explore the process of reading as a particular movement or form of touch. I hope they inform the stories in an interesting way.

## Tom reads Hegel

Tom is sitting in the library. The other students are rustling their papers and whispering among the bookshelves. Tom is reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The work is the work of a master of philosophy. Hegel lays out concept after concept. Each is carefully worded and well thought-out. Tom is reading and trying to listen only to Hegel. Sometimes he manages to keep so intensely silent that he succeeds.

What is Tom's silence? It goes beyond non-speaking. It is a restraint. He is holding back his own thoughts, in order to fully perceive this other thinking. Tom delays his own thought impulses, so that they do not interfere with his understanding of Hegel. He pushes his own criticism aside in order to stay as close as possible to Hegel's ideas.

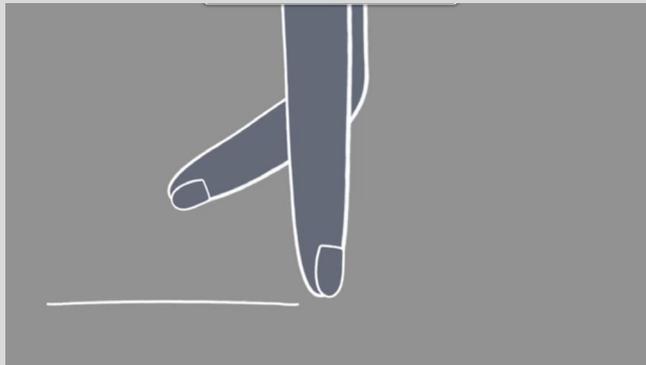
Tom's being silent means that Tom benefits more from listening to Hegel than from following his own ideas. Hegel's tone is very confident. As if he also assumes that Tom would benefit more from reading Hegel than from thinking for himself. Sometimes Tom has the impression that Hegel anticipates possible questions and comments from his readers. Yet this does not mean that Hegel answers Tom.

While Hegel is speaking and Tom is listening, Tom is a disciple. The promise of listening is: whoever listens best will be the next master. In a few years he or she will be allowed to speak and to expect new disciples to remain silent in front of him or her. Tom listens very well. He becomes familiar with Hegel's style, with his intonation, with his arguments. Tom reads the sentences again and again. He reads secondary literature: the readings of other disciples. He becomes a disciple of the disciples. Tom liberates himself from this situation by starting to teach. He writes books. He explains the master to other disciples. He becomes a master among the disciples.

Tom does not become a master before the master. After practicing silence for so long, he is never able to fully give up restraining and inhibiting his own thinking. Even after years and years, Hegel is still Hegel and Tom is still a person who is silent when he reads. And although Hegel resides in powerless, quiet, dead books, Hegel is never silent.

## Ina reads Derrida

Video link: Animation accompanying *Ina reads Derrida*



 <https://vimeo.com/303232928>

Derrida's texts start harmlessly enough. But then they suddenly accelerate. When they get moving, they want with all their might for Ina to think differently than she normally does. They insist that Ina keep all their axioms and claims active in her mind and that she take them as the foundation for the next sentence. Derrida's texts want Ina to adopt and maintain their special level of tension. They want to induce a certain twist into Ina's thoughts. All of Derrida's admonitory sentences in the first place admonish Ina not to sink back into her usual, tension-free way of thinking.

After a while the tension of the texts decreases. Time and again, the texts are interspersed with surprising passages of relaxation, in which things are said that seem self-evident. But Ina must be on the watch: soon the text will accelerate again, and if she does not read with the proper tension—with this special Derrida-tension—she will have to shamefacedly go back and reread whole pages.

Ina wonders how Derrida got himself into the right tension when he was young. She wonders whether he was resting when he wrote the tension-free passages and then started again with a fresh mind. She also wonders how long it took Derrida to be completely at home in his tension. How long until he was not able to pull out of it anymore. The main question is, however, how much Derrida Ina needs to read in order to be able to effortlessly switch to Derrida-mode.

A year later, reading the *Margins of Philosophy*, it occurs to Ina that she might have completely misunderstood the tension-free passages. Suddenly it appears to her as very likely that these passages have a special twist of their own and are actually also tense passages. Perhaps the very trickiness of Derrida's thinking presents itself in its purest form there; perhaps these putatively harmless passages are the key to Derrida's wit. If this is the case, however, these passages are too tricky for Ina. She continues to hop back and forth between different states of tension as elegantly as she can while reading Derrida.

## Phillip reads Deleuze

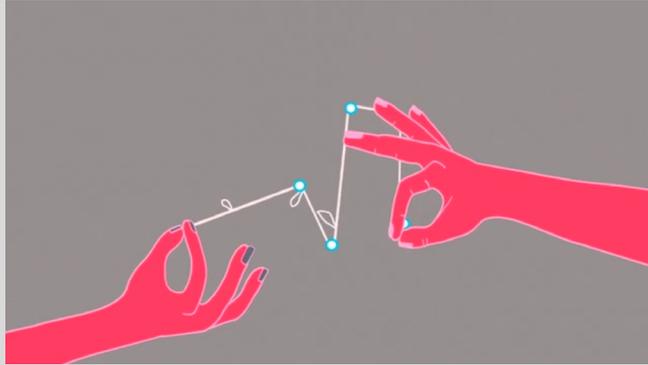
Every day Phillip sits down at his kitchen table for an hour and reads Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze creates concepts that vibrate in Phillip's head. Deleuze seems to be trying to formulate something that is almost impossible to formulate. Something that even Deleuze himself is hardly able to think. Something that he cannot define in simple terms. Phillip assumes that this is because the concepts are so glowingly new even for Deleuze. They might be easier to describe later on, but as long as Deleuze is comprehending them in the process of writing them down, he needs to put great effort into this writing. This is precisely why Deleuze is strict. Phillip feels Deleuze's boundless will to accuracy. Deleuze builds sentences full of negations: *It is not like this, and it is also not like that, and there is no way that it is like that.* Deleuze seems to be able to tell most precisely what his concepts mean by saying what they do not mean.

Phillip—at his kitchen table—feels stupid, for he is always thinking in the direction forbidden by Deleuze. Again and again, Deleuze reprimands him. After reading and thinking for weeks and being upbraided for his thoughts by Deleuze, after weeks of not being allowed to think anymore what he had thought at first, Phillip still does not know exactly what to think. But as he reads and re-reads and tries not to think what he thought the first time, a strong inkling starts to emerge. The concepts vibrate even more intensely.

Years later Phillip realizes that Deleuze's admonishing sentences refer only marginally to Phillip. His reading group explains to him that Deleuze was writing against other books and authors, usually without mentioning their names. Everywhere in Deleuze, texts are written against other texts, texts try to overturn and kill other texts without even mentioning the enemy's name. The insiders know it anyway; the others probably do not need to know. Phillip is always caught in the middle when he reads. He is attacked along with the targeted authors. He is snapped at for positions he is not even fully acquainted with. The vexing thing is that the idea of defending himself never even comes to his mind. On the contrary, Phillip tends to agree with whatever text he is currently reading. He feels justly criticised. Whenever he reads serious philosophy, he finds himself in the crossfire of discourse. The fury of this discourse rages around Phillip. But it is thanks to this severe rage that Phillip knows he is concerning himself with what is really important.

## Keira reads Donald Davidson

Video link: Animation accompanying *Keira reads Donald Davidson*



<https://vimeo.com/303092682>

Keira pursues her reading like a martial art. Nothing feels better than hitting the keys and sensing her own arguments hitting the mark. Keira's philosophical fighting ethos is as strict as any found in a dojo: proud and composed, without self-pity and with the best possible technique requiring daily practice.

At the moment the fight is between her and Donald Davidson. She reads his essay *What Metaphors mean*. From the very first lines she does not like Davidson. There is something in his tone. Keira immediately wants him to be wrong. He is already tired when he thinks of the stupid objections that will inevitably arise. He believes that anyone smart enough will agree with his argument as a matter of course. Keira can hear it clearly. She admonishes herself to ignore his arrogance for the time being. She stares at the photocopied pages in front of her and reads closely.

Davidson discusses one theorist of metaphor after the other. He is most comfortable when he is proving others wrong. He tries to destroy their arguments with a few sentences. In this haste, obvious inaccuracies occur. But this does not necessarily mean that he is wrong on the whole.

While criticising others, Davidson is clear. But when he explains his own position, he remains vague. He goes on and on about metaphors carrying only a literal meaning. Yet he understands the metaphor as a discrete phenomenon. This does not make sense to Keira. It confuses her. She squints her eyes in order to read more accurately. To see what he means. By the end of the essay, Keira is still not exactly sure what his main argument is. The secondary literature does not help. Neither does it explain the precise construction of Davidson's argument, nor do the listed objections to it convince her.

Davidson is like so many theorists: he only thinks from his own little perspective and does not even notice himself doing so. Keira is undecided. Here and there he has a point: other authors' perpetual raving over the endless possibilities of metaphor is annoying. Keira reads the essay again and

tentatively agrees in order to see whether everything suddenly makes sense. She does not forget her reservations, she just pushes them a little farther away.

Keira wants to understand Davidson. She is willing to concede his argument if necessary. Yet she will not submit to Davidson by any means. It is important not to submit. Even if Davidson is smarter. Especially if Davidson is smarter. Nothing is decided yet.

What would it take for Keira to win? Victory would be hers if she could understand Davidson's text completely while at the same time being smarter than him in one aspect. If she could see Davidson's line of argument clearly, and at the same time could say why one particular point of it does not work. Then she would have won.

But it is not that easy. Of course she can find a few weak points. Especially his examples offer many possibilities for critique. But these points are not central to his argument. Pointing to them in order to reject the whole would be dishonest. Keira would only have won if she could find a mistake that is so central to the essay that it calls the whole thing into question.

Two days later, Keira reads the second half of the essay again. She is almost certain that Davidson is wrong, just not entirely. He is not quite as arrogant as she first thought. He is trying to be fair. Finally, she finds his core hypothesis: Davidson wants literality to reside on a different level of meaning than metaphor. He wants Keira to think of metaphor as a figure of speech such as a lie or a joke: metaphors are thus far less fundamental than literality. Keira thinks that the whole essay would be much more intelligible if Davidson would explain this right at the beginning. While she sits at her desk and wonders whether she can refute this thesis, she suddenly finds the right handle for pulling the whole essay to the ground. She can catch him where he is just as naive as those he criticizes: on the question of what literality actually is. He says nothing about it. He believes in the self-evident nature of the concept. Keira would only need one page to pull this rug out from under his feet. After that, it would be child's play to prove that his claims are untenable. It's a delicious moment. During the next hour, many more delicious moments occur, as Keira becomes more and more sure that her argument hits the mark. She is able to unhinge Davidson's whole essay. Now she has made contact; she feels Davidson's strength and she feels her opposing force wrestle him to the ground. She has found the right angle and can argue precisely. Now she can hit hard. It is a pity that Davidson is already dead and cannot answer. But he would probably not even read the objections of an unimportant female continental doctoral student anyway. But if he did, though, he would have to take them damn serious. Like the professors—old, conservative sods as well as young progressive ones—who only take her seriously once she has made some sharp remarks. It is only then that even female professors raise their eyebrows and remember Keira's name.

That evening, her triumph has already gone stale. It is actually annoying that she found something so fundamental. It means that Davidson is not an equal opponent. His mistake is so basic that it is not even worth writing a chapter on him. Davidson has become so unimportant that he will merely end up in a footnote in her dissertation. This is a great pity since she found such an irresistible handle.

## Verena reads Hannah Arendt

Video link: Animation accompanying *Verena reads Hannah Arendt*



 <https://vimeo.com/303233443>

Verena is reading in the park. She has a new haircut. Now she looks like a hands-on kind of person and at the same time very young. She is sitting the way she sat as a girl, with the book on her knees. It is the beginning of cardigan season: the sun is shining through the trees, still providing some warmth, but the breeze is chilly. Verena looks at her book.

Hannah Arendt leads the way and takes Verena by the hand. Her sentences trot along cheerfully, break briefly into a gallop, and return to a trot. She is focused on the idea she is developing, but she always has an eye on her readers and whether they are following her line of thought. Hannah Arendt has thought about everything for a long time. She takes Verena by the hand as if Verena were twelve and Hannah Arendt her beloved but strict godmother. Verena follows her easily and without defiance. Hannah Arendt helps Verena perceive something new: while her sentences guide Verena through one piece of the world, Hannah Arendt at the same time brings order into the monstrosity of this piece, thereby mitigating it. So that the world does not strike Verena in all its vehemence and Verena faces something more rational than the world as such, something that can be made sense of. And, moreover, something that allows for more hope.

There are two things that Hannah Arendt always keeps in mind: The Third Reich and the Greeks. The experience of the Third Reich lies beneath everything, lies above everything. The Greeks can be relied on. Hannah Arendt protects herself by looking to them. To her the Greeks stand for reason and farsightedness. Hannah Arendt uses them to understand the world. Looking to the Greeks, the world can return to reason. But it is not just these two things that keep reminding Verena of her childhood in the 80s in West Germany. Verena reads Hannah Arendt and sees the dark rooms stuffed with books her parents dragged her to. While the children played in the sun, the adults sat in heavy reading chairs. They smoked cigarettes, drank sherry, and talked endlessly. If you were quiet and inconspicuous, you could stay and listen. In Verena's memory, a beam of sunlight always came through a window and made the dust dance. Her parents were shaped by

the 60s. They had grown up believing in the Greeks and in Picasso, Klee, Brahms, and Glenn Gould. Remnants of this were still in them in the 80s. The third Reich was a point of reference, which they—like Arendt—never lost sight of. Verena remembers the atmosphere of these discussions: there was a shared reason, an encompassing concern, and a hope, all of which she now finds in Hannah Arendt. Only the high spirits conveyed by some of Arendt's ideas is absent from the murmurs of her childhood. The more she reads, the more Verena tunes into the sound of her childhood. She tries to figure out what exactly defined that sound.

Verena sits in the meadow and wants something back. But she does not know whether she is longing for what was refined and truly democratic within West Germany. Or whether she is longing for her young parents, whose friendly reason seemed to establish the possibility of a whole friendly, sensible world. Or if she is simply longing for herself at age twelve, when she was waiting for the right people to come, take her by the hand, and lead her into a world full of art and exciting ideas. Verena puts the book down and stretches out in the grass.

### Inger reads and reads

Once in her early twenties, Inger was stranded at an airport and read Camille Paglia all night. Camille Paglia made Inger incredibly angry. The anger was terrific. Inger sat on the floor among all her things and was shocked by what she was reading. A moment later she was thrilled because Paglia was showing her a completely new view of the world. Ideas that had made Inger incredibly angry just half an hour ago suddenly began to make sense. Sitting there among all the waiting passengers, Inger could not stop reading.

During the next year she read Friedrich Nietzsche, then Judith Butler, then Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The texts screamed at Inger. They stood in front of her, they stood in her way and hit her in the face. The ideas were brand new and made her buzz with excitement. Everything was possible. Everything could be different. The world could be full of surprising meaning. Philosophical theories shifted her perspective and thereby shifted everything. Inger could become completely different in this other world. Inger was reading in order to become a new, courageous person in a world full of new possibilities. Paglia, Nietzsche, Butler, and Hegel had already changed her world and Inger felt that she had just begun.

While Inger continued to read, while she was getting her degree, and the texts shook her up and tossed her around, while she was reading herself into a future in which she would be another person, something happened. She learned the language, she identified the foundations, she recognized the figures of thought. She attained a stable position. Fifteen years after she sat with Paglia at the airport, Inger had a doctoral thesis, a post-doc project, and a system. Now each new text immediately reminds her of Leibniz or Hegel or Žižek. Philosophy for her is still about earth-shattering perspectives. But Inger sees all of these perspectives at the same time. During these fifteen years—without being aware of it—she left the place where all the perspectives lay before

her. Now she lives one floor up. She looks down at all the perspectives. She sees them as positions on a map. She puts them into perspective. All the great theories look somewhat similar from above. Inger still has strong opinions, but she sees herself as one position in the field. She looks down onto her own position from above. Although Inger always hated it when people talked of philosophy as a form of literature, she herself has become a literary scholar of philosophy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Tom reads Hegel", "Phillip reads Deleuze", and "Inger reads and reads" were first published in German as part of Veronika Reichl (2018), "*Das Gefühl zu Denken: Machterfahrungen beim Lesen von Theorie*," in *Macht:Denken: Substantialistische und relationalistische Theorien – eine Kontroverse*, edited by Katrin Felgenhauer and Falk Bornmüller, 153–157. Bielefeld: Transcript.

## Biography

Veronika Reichl lives as a writer, lecturer and artist in Berlin. She received her PhD in the field of *Art, Design and Media* from the University of Portsmouth. Her book *Sprachkino [Language-Cinema]* describes in the interface between abstract, philosophical language and pictorial media. Veronika Reichl did a Diploma in Graphic Design and a Master of Arts in Media Art at Merz Akademie, Stuttgart.

© 2019 Veronika Reichl



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).