

Jakob Lothe (Oslo)

**Narrative and Ethics: Conrad, Kafka, Sebald  
("Heart of Darkness", "In der Strafkolonie" and "Austerlitz")**

Focusing on significant aspects of narrative and ethics in three fictional texts, this talk starts from the premise that, both generally and certainly in the narratives under consideration here, there is a close and thematically productive interplay of these two dimensions: while narrative can effectively present characters and plots involving ethical problems of considerable complexity, theoretically expounded ethical issues become more nuanced, and more pressingly relevant, if given narrative shape. Turning first to Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, the lecture discusses how Conrad uses the character and narrator Marlow to dramatize awkward moments of doubt and difficult choice, such as that experienced by Marlow when confronted with, but unable to help, the dying blacks in the "Grove of death" passage. A main point argued in the following discussion of Franz Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie" is that, in spite of the great difference between Kafka's main character and Conrad's, the position and attitudinal perspective of "der Forschungsreisende" are also revealed by the narrative to be morally dubious. Finally, the lecture considers how, in his novel *Austerlitz*, W.G. Sebald explores historical and ethical dimensions of the Holocaust by using a frame narrator who, as in *Heart of Darkness*, becomes irresistibly attracted to a teller whose narrative seems to circle round, and hesitantly approach, what remains an empty centre.