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Integrating Literary Theory

Buchbesprechungen

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Integrating Literary Theory: Systems-theoretical Perspectives
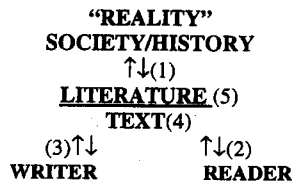## of Literature and Literary Theory

In this paper I shall try to give a rough outline of systems-theoretical approaches to literature and literary theory in order to show how literary studies might profit from a critical incorporation of theoretical developments in the natural sciences and sociology. Special emphasis will be placed on the new chances of bringing together the divergent strands of literary theory from a systems-theoretical perspective. Thus, a short survey of the different lines of literary theory prevalent today and their historical background might serve as a suitable starting point.

In the introduction to his influential study *The Mirror and the Lamp* M.H. Abrams traces the development of Western theories of art and literature from the days of ancient Greece to the 20th century using the following four co-ordinates[1]:

<div align="center">

UNIVERSE

↑(1)

WORK(4)

(3)↓   ↓(2)

ARTIST   AUDIENCE

</div>
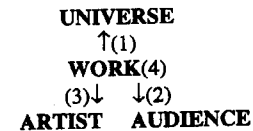
Abrams distinguishes betwen "mimetic theories" dealing with the relationship between a work of art and reality (1), "pragmatic theories" dealing with the relationship between a work of art and its audience (2), "expressive theories" dealing with the relationship between a work of art and its creator (3), and "objective theories" dealing with a work of art on ist own (4). These different orientations of literary theory have all emerged at different stages of the development: The foundations of the great variety of "mimetic theories" were laid by Aristotle and Plato, "pragmatic theories" go back to Horace's formula *prodesse et delectare*, "expressive theories" were first put forward by the Romantics, and "objective theories" are accentuated by 20th century academic criticism. With slight modifications these co-ordinates are still useful for providing an overview of the different "schools" of literary theory as an academic discipline in the second half of the 20th century. I suggest the following scheme:

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[1] Cf. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theorie and the Critical Tration* (1953) (London 1960), 3-29, 6. See also M.H. Abrams, "Types and Orientations of ritical Theories", *Doing Things with Texts. Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York 1989), 3-30.

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                    "REALITY"
                SOCIETY/HISTORY
                      ↑↓(1)
                  LITERATURE (5)
                     TEXT(4)
          (3)↑↓                    ↑↓(2)
          WRITER                   READER
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With respect to their main focus of interest, current theories of literature and methods of literary studies can then roughly be categorized as follows:

(1) positivistic approaches, Marxism, feminism, cultural materialism, discourse analysis, new historicism (→5)

(2) hermeneutics, reception theory, reader response criticism

(3) biographical criticism, psychoanalytical approaches, (hermeneutics), (Marxism), (feminism)

(4) (Russian) formalism, New Criticism, (structuralism), (reception theory)

(5) structuralism, post-structuralism/deconstruction (→1)

Of course different methods are necessary for answering different questions, but nevertheless, literary studies seem to lack a coherent theoretical framework which could function as a stabilizing background for the integration of different fields of research. Such a comprehensive concept of literary theory should be able to cover questions about

(1) the status of literature in society and the relationship between literary history and socio-cultural evolution (1/5),

(2) the conditions of literary production and reception (2/3), and

(3) the literariness of literatur including the close analysis of texts and their relation to literature as a whole (4/5).

Futhermore, literary theory could profit from a meta-theoretical investigation into the status and the epistemological foundations of literary studies. It seems to me that systems-theoretical approaches offer a good opportunity for achieving these goals.

A translation of systems-theoretical concepts from the natural sciences into a social theory has been offered by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. The centrepiece of his theory, *Soziale Systeme* (1984)[2], added the central concept of autopoiesis or self-constitution to the theory of social differentiation. Within the limited space of this paper it will not be possible to provide an adequate summary of Luhmann's theory[3], but only to point very selectively to some of the consequences and new opportunities which result from an application of this new theoretical paradigm to literature. Nor will it be possible to discuss any of the problems evoked by the translation of systems-theoretical concepts from the natural sciences to the humanities, such as, for example, the epistemological question whether literature is, in fact, a system. Instead, this paper will follow a "post-

epistemological" constructivist approach considering "the applicability of systems-theoretical concepts to 'literary matters' and the degree to which these concepts help us solve problems in the discourse of literary studies."[4]

The re-integration of the divergent strands of literary theory, which became only more distinct during the boom literary theory enjoyed in the 1980s, has now definitely become a problem in the discourse of literary studies. A comprehensive theory of literature could provide a sufficient degree of homogeneity within the subject, so that research based on different theories/methods could be discussed more productively. The following three sections of this paper chart the potential of systems-theoretical concepts in literary studies with reference to the three levels of a comprehensive theory of literature indicated above.[5]

1) Literature as a Social System

Literary studies in Germany began to adopt concepts from sociological systems theory in the mid-1980s being attracted by the new light the theory of social differentiation shed on research on the 18th century. The theory regarded characteristic traits of modern history such as the emergence of relativistic concepts of "reality" as a consequence of the transition from a society organized according to the principle of stratification to a society organized according to the principle of functional differentiation. The latter has been realized only once: It is the modern society which originated in Europe after the Middle Ages and reached an irreversible state of development during the 18th century after the most important functional subsystems (e.g. economy, politics, education, law, science etc.) had established themselves. In this context a transition from premodern to modern literature took place which suggested a conception of literature as a functional subsystem or social system.

According to Luhmann social systems distinguish between numerous systemic references such as

1) their relationship to society as a whole which is defined by their *function*,

2) their relationship to other social systems which is defined by *performance (Leistungen)*, and

3) their relationship to themselves *(reflexivity)* which regulates the formation of their identities by self-referential self-description and self-observation *(teilsystemspezifische Reflexion)*.[6]

Thus, the subsystems of modern society "are functionally equivalent for society, unequal in their relation to their environment and (at least on a theoretical level –

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[2] Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt/M. 1984).

[3] For an excellent introduction to basic concepts of Luhmann's theory in English cf. Dietrich Schwanitz, "Systems Theory and the Environment of Theory", *The Current in Criticism. Essays on the Present and Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke (West Lafayette, Indiana 1987), 265-294.

[4] Siegfried J. Schmidt, "Literary Systems as Self-Organizing Systems", *Selforganization. Portrait of a Scientific Revolution (Sociology of the Sciences. Yearbook* Vol. XIII), ed. Wolfgang Krohn, Günter Küppers and Helga Nowottny (Dordrecht/Boston/London 1990), 143-153, 143. Except for these basic premises Schmidt's approach differs in some aspects from the one suggested in this paper.

[5] On the meta-theoretical potential of systems theory cf. Schwanitz, op.cit. (note 3), 265-268.

[6] Cf., for example, Niklas Luhmann, "Gesellschaftsstruktur und semantische Tradition", *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* Vol. 1 (Frankfurt/M. 1980), 9-71, 27.

C.R.) equally accessible to all individuals."[7] The operational form of these social systems is communication.

Even at this stage the correspondences between the three levels of systemic references and the three levels of a comprehensive theory of literature are obvious. The question about the status of literature in society would thus have to be answered with regard to the first systemic reference of literature as a social system: a subsystem to society brought about by functional differentiation must be characterized by the specific *function* it fulfils in society. Suggestions for a systems-theoretical reformulation of this traditional concern of literary theory have so far been offered by Luhmann himself, Siegfried J. Schmidt and Gerhard Plumpe.[8]

In his publications on the sociology of art[9] Luhmann deduces the *function* of art from its capability for confronting reality with alternative versions of reality. In doing so art contributes in a special way to the production of world contingency.[10] But how can such a *function* be in any way specific to art or literature as a social system, if any social system which emerges as a result of functional differentiation contributes to the contingency of modern times? What is the difference between the contingency produced by art or literature and the contingency produced by other social systems?

In a recent publication Luhmann acknowledges this problem by stating that the function of art is to demonstrate the possibility of order in the realm of potential reality.[11] This suggestion points in the same direction as Siegfried J. Schmidt's attempt to define the function of literature as a compensation for negative side effects of functional differentiation such as, for example, alienation.[12] This is certainly an important aspect of modern literature, but the point of reference for such a programme cannot be the whole of society because it does not seem likely that the process of functional differentiation brings about anything which counteracts the same process. Instead, the point of reference for such a programme can be located in the individuals confronted with modern society. This problem will be taken up again in section 2 of this paper.

[7] Dietrich Schwanitz, "Literary History or Socio-Cultural Evolution?", *Anglistentag 1986 Kiel. Vorträge*, ed. Rudolf Böhm and Henning Wode (Giessen 1987), 209-225, 215.

[8] This state of research is documented by Gerhard Plumpe and Niels Werber, "Literatur ist codierbar. Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft", *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie. Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven*, ed. Siegfried J. Schmidt (Opladen 1993), 9-43, and Niels Werber, *Literatur als System. Zur Ausdifferenzierung literarischer Kommunikation* (Opladen 1992). Werber himself follows Plumpe's position as does this paper.

[9] Niklas Luhmann, "Ist Kunst codierbar?", *"schön": Zur Diskussion eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, ed. S.J. Schmidt (München 1976), 60-95; "Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst", *Stil. Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements*, ed. H.U. Gumbrecht and K.L. Pfeiffer (Frankfut/M. 1986a), 620-672; "Das Medium der Kunst", *DELFIN* VII (1986b), 5-15; "Weltkunst", in: N. Luhmann, F.D. Bunsen and D. Baecker, *Unbeobachtbare Welt. Über Kunst und Architektur* (Bielefeld 1990), 7-45; "Die Evolution des Kunstsystems", *Kunstforum International* 124 (1993), 221-228.

[10] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 9), 1986a, 624/625.

[11] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 9), 1990, 38/39.

[12] Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/M. 1989), 21/418.

The latest definition of the *function* of literature is offered by Gerhard Plumpe[13]: From a survey of traditional descriptions of the function of literature, which have been influenced by Horace's formula *prodesse et delectare*, he draws the conclusion that in the process of functional differentiation the *prodesse*-function has increasingly been taken over by other social systems such as economy, law, politics, education etc. At the same time the gradual emergence of "leisure" makes the need for a *function* "entertainment by interesting works" and its fulfilment by art and literature plausible. Such a broad definition of *function* leaves enough scope for the inclusion of all manifestations of modern art and literature, which are not exclusively, but at least to a certain degree determined by this *function*. Additional shaping factors from outside the literary system can then be described with regard to the relations between the literary system and other systems in its environment.

2) The Literary System and ist Environment

In a systems-theoretical framework questions about the conditions of literary production and reception turn up as questions about the relation between the literary system and its environment. Without going into too much theoretical detail it can be said that the environment of a social system in a functionally differentiated society is made up of other social systems on the one hand and psychic systems on the other hand. The resulting two types of environmental relations differ in respect of the degree of theoretical complexity which is neccessary for an adequate description. The following remarks will focus on those aspects which are important for literary theory.

2.1) The Literary System and other Social Systems

On a general level the emergence and evolution of any social system leads to a newly specified environment for other social systems. According to Luhmann the relations which are established between social systems can be described as reciprocal *performance (Leistungen)*.[14] With regard to the literary system, one could think of literature supporting educational ideals, propagating religious or political ideas and offering new economic opportunities.[15] On the other hand, the development of modern literature has been influenced by developments in other social systems such as, for example, law, which has provided the necessary background for the idea of an author "owning" his work, or economy, which has provided opportunities for selling it.

Luhmann describes these network-like relations with the help of a slightly simplifying but useful input/output model[16], which sheds light on the intensity of a system's interaction with its environment. All in all a system gains autonomy by a self-regulated concentration on a limited number of particular aspects of its

[13] Cf. Gerhard Plumpe. *Ästhetische Kommunikation der Moderne* Vol.2: *Von Nietzsche bis zur Gegenwart* (Opladen 1993), 300-304.

[14] Schwanitz's translation is *task-performance*, cf. Schwanitz, op.cit. (note 7), 215.

[15] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 9), 1990, 39.

[16] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 2), 1984, 273-282.

environment. However, it should be kept in mind that a theory of autopoietic systems does not allow for a direct influence of the environment on a system, but only for an environmental stimulation of processes within the system. Nevertheless, these processes are necessary because an autopoietic system defines its boundaries by specific internal reactions to the surplus of complexity in its environment.

It is obvious that stimulations by other social systems have played an important part in the development of the literary system and should thus be of special interest with regard to literary history as a part of socio-cultural evolution. Furthermore, a close examination of the relationship between *performance* in this sense, which provided an opportunity for the survival of older motivations of literature (cf. Abrams' "pragmatic theories" or the role of literature in stratified societies), and the new *function* "entertainment" seems to promise instructive results.

2.2) The Literary System and Psychic Systems

The observations in section 1 of this paper have already pointed to the special service literature performs for the modern individual. Within a systems-theoretical framework this service cannot be described in terms of *function*, which refers to a system's relation to the whole of society. It will have to be put down to the relations between the literary system and psychic systems instead. In view of the specific capability of the literary system for responding to the needs of psychic systems such as, for example, offering a sphere in which subjective views can be formed freely and made public, it seems to be useful to add this dimension to Luhmann's concept of *performance*. While this term suggests itself for both dimensions because of its semantic implications, the technical difference between *performance* among social systems on the one hand and between social and psychic systems on the other hand can be taken into account when dealing with either of the dimensions, respectively. As a result, this theoretical design makes it easier to keep an eye on the degree to which the literary system is stimulated by either psychic or social systems in its environment.

The qualitative difference between the input/output model presented under 2.1 and the relations between social and psychic systems which Luhmann terms *interpenetration*[17] is caused by the difference between psychic and social systems within the framework of Luhmann's theory. According to Luhmann both social and psychic systems have emerged in co-evolution and reciprocal facilitation. This process is supported by *interpenetration*, i.e. autopoietic systems putting their respective complexities at each other's disposal. Although psychic and social systems differ as to their basic operational form (consciousness and communication, respectively), *interpenetration* is made possible by a common operational factor: *meaning (Sinn)*. Luhmann's systems-theoretical adaptation of the phenomenological concept of meaning forms the basis for the central idea that autopoietic systems are able to combine autopoietical closure with openness to-wards their environment.[18] The result of this process of co-evolution is the functionally differentiated society of the modern age, which consists of a network of social systems based on communication without any overiding principle of integration. Under these conditions individuals can no longer form their identity according to their social position, but they have to do so strictly on their own. In Luhmann's theory a modern individual is formed at the intersection of organic, psychic and social systems, while his or her "conscious" identity is primarily dependent on the *interpenetration* between the psychic system, i.e. his or her consciousness, and the social systems which form modern society. From the point of view of the psychic system this formative process could be called *socialization*, while social systems require the *inclusion* of psychic systems.

At this point it should be possible to return to Siegfried J. Schmidt's attempt at defining the *function* of the literary system with regard to a compensation of the negative side effects of functional differentiation. In view of the concepts presented in this section this "function" can be reinterpreted in terms of *performance*. The special service the literary system performs for psychic systems can thus be subsumed under the heading "production of meaning", or, more plainly, "making sense".

This rough outline of the two dimensions of the systemic reference of *performance* has indicated the potential of systems-theoretical concepts for the integration of questions about the social (2.1) and the individual (2.2) conditions of literary production and reception into a comprehensive theory of literature. The last section will now deal with questions about the literariness of literature and the consequences of systems-theoretical approaches for the analysis of literary texts.

3) The Literariness of Literature

A systems-theoretical reformulation of questions about the literariness of literature must be concerned with a description of those processes which form the identity of the system and which are necessary for its continuance. For this project Niklas Luhmann offers a "theory of symbolically generalised media of communication"[19], which puts auto-catalytic effects down to two structural characteristics of autopoietic systems: "symbolic generalisation" into *media* and "binary schematization" into *codes*. Thus, the communication in any social system is characterized by a specific *medium* and a specific *code*, which stabilize the communication within the system and open up new opportunities of communicative selection.

There is little or no disagreement about the *medium* of literary communication: communication can be considered to be "literary" once it processes a writ-

[17] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 2), 1984, 286-345.

[18] Cf. Schwanitz, op.cit. (note 7), 1987, 210 and Luhmann, op.cit. (note 2), 1984, 92-147. For an introduction to Luhmann's concept of *meaning (Sinn)* see Schwanitz, op.cit. (note 3), 1987, 270-276.
[19] Niklas Luhmann, "Einführende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie symbolisch generalisierter Kommunikationsmedien", *Soziologische Aufklärung* Vol.2 (Opladen 1975), 170-192.

ten text as a "work of art".[20] In any "work of art" the difference between *medium* and form forms an integrated whole. On the level of "symbolic generalisation" the *medium* "work of art" refers to the whole variety of forms conceivable at a given evolutionary stage of the literary system. The actual realization of a specific form can then be conceived of as a selection from the variety offered by the *medium*. The identity of the literary system is thus formed by the systemic reference of *reflexivity*, which can be reconstructed with regard to the relations between "works of art" in the process of the system's evolution. In this process different stages of development are marked by different possibilities of attribution and realization. Thus, the identity of the literary system generates is very own conditions of literary production and reception which are then negotiated by the external factors discussed in section 2.

In respect of a systems-theoretical concept of literary *code* several suggestions have been made. Siegfried J. Schmidt's proposal, "literary v. non-literary"[21], has clearly been motivated by the autonomous character of the literary system. However, it cannot fulfil the tasks of a *code* in Luhmann's sense, because it is merely a repetition of the difference between the system and its environment and does not produce options of negation within the system. On the other hand, Niklas Luhmann suggests the binary opposition of "beautiful v. ugly"[22] which works technically and has recourse to the concept of "beauty" which has held a central position in the history of Western aesthetics for centuries. Nevertheless, this suggestion poses two problems: As Gerhard Plumpe points out[23], it is not entirely plausible, from a systems-theoretical point of view, to equate the *reflexivity* of the literary system with the aesthetic tradition because aesthetic theory can be regarded as a discipline of philosophy and thus works according to the code of science, i.e. true v. untrue. Furthermore, the manifestations of modern art seem to attach less and less importance to criteria of beauty. The *code* "beautiful v. ugly" would thus imply a latent crisis of the modern literary system.

In view of these problems Gerhard Plumpe suggests the binary opposition "interesting v. boring" as the *code* of modern literary communication.[24] His view is supported by the fact that the term "interesting" has played an important part right from the beginnings of the modern literary system in the 18th century.[25] Technically, this *code* can even perform a "binary schematization" of the disjunction "beautiful v. ugly" because both of its poles can be either "interesting" or "boring".

The most striking feature of literary communication as opposed to the specific communication of other social systems is the semantically variable dependence of its *code* on the *interpenetration* between the literary system and psychic systems. The definite attribution of a communication to the literary system is primarily based on a psychic system's interpretation of a text as a (more or less) interesting "work of art". Only then can the specific literary *code* come into effect and literary communication is realized. In this way the conditions for a continuation of literary communication become very flexible because, in theory, any text can be utilized as a starting point for literary communication. Even so, the literary system provides a formative context: On the one hand, the acceptability of a text as "literary" is to a certain degree determined by earlier literary communication. On the other hand, acceptability forms a prerequisite for the continuation of literary communication. As a result, it becomes obvious that the literariness of literary communication. As a result, it becomes obvious that the literariness of literature cannot be defined by qualities inherent in "literary" texts. Instead, the appearance of particular textual features will have to be considered in relation to the ongoing evolution of literary communication and its non-literary contexts. The theoretical foundation for this widening of perspective can be found in the systems-theoretical concept of society as communication based on language *and/or* "symbolically generalised media of communication".

Research on this demanding field has only just begun. Nevertheless, it seems to promise interesting results, because the homogeneity of systems-theoretical concepts opens up new possibilities of comparability between different levels of inquiry: Literature can be conceived of as a systematic context of communications about texts as "works of art" within the larger context of society as communication. With regard to modern literature, socio-cultural evolution has led to a primary orientation towards the *function* "entertainment". The fulfilment of this *function* depends on the production of interesting "works of art" so that innovation by original works becomes the main principle of literary evolution. This principle obtains its formative effect on the level of *reflexivity*, which determines the identity of the system by regulating the relation between the systemic references of *function* and *performance*. The latter qualifies the fundamental autonomy of the system to a certain degree because it is on this level that the system defines its boundary to the environment by its specific processing of environmental dimensions of *meaning*.

While the basic characteristics of the modern literary system have not changed since the 18th century, the continuing differentiation of the system has been marked by changes in the relation between *function, performance,* and *reflexivity*. These changes have led to different programmatic types of literature such as, for example, romanticism, realism, aestheticism or avant-garde literature.[26] On the whole, this development has been characterized by an increasing degree of autonomy leading to the climax of modernism in the early decades of the 20th century. After the exhaustion of the potential for innovation or provocation with regard to both form and content the further development of art and literature had to become more pluralistic. Its only general feature seems to be an overall increase of more or less explicit self-reflexiveness.

Against this background the pluralism of contemporary literature can be analysed in historical perspective by specifying the relation between *function, performance* and *reflexivity* for each text separately before categorizing it accord-

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[20] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 9), 1986b and Plumpe, *op.cit.*, (note 13), 1993, 293-298.

[21] Cf. Schmidt, *op.cit.* (note 12), 1989, 20.

[22] Cf. Luhmann, op.cit. (note 9), 1976, 1986a/b. Luhmann 1990 acknowledges the problems mentioned below, but he does not come up with an alternative.

[23] Cf. Gerhard Plumpe, *Ästhetische Kommunikation der Moderne* Vol.1: *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Opladen 1993), 15-21.

[24] Cf. Plumpe, *op.cit.* (note 13), 1993, 293-298.

[25] See, for example, Freidrich Schlegel's essay "Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie" (1795/96).

[26] Cf. Plumpe/Werber, op.cit. (note 8), 1993, 37-40 and Plumpe, *op.cit.* (note 13), 1993, 299-300.

ing to its most plausible dominant orientation: a literary text can thus be read primarily with regard to its entertaining potential (> *function*), with regard to its capability for "making sense" or providing information (> *performance*), or with regard to its status as a "work of art" (> *reflexivity*). However, the dominant orientation is neither an inherent characteristic of any text nor does it obliterate the remaining systemic references. Instead, it is to a large degree dependent on the reader, whose choice is in turn determined by his personal needs, his socialization, current ideas about literature, etc. Systems-theoretical perspectives of literature seem to offer new opportunites for a comprehensive negotiation of all these factors and their complex relations.

Kiel   *Christoph Reinfandt*