

Reinfandt, Christoph. "How German Is It? The Place of Systems-Theoretical Approaches In Literary Studies." *EJES – European Journal of English Studies* 5.3 (2001): 275-288.

Systems Theory and Literature

Editor

Christoph Reinfandt



How German Is It? The Place of Systems-Theoretical Approaches in Literary Studies

Christoph Reinfandt
Universität Kiel, Germany

Systems theory and literature – to many people this will not sound like a very promising idea. To them, the very term systems theory seems to imply something rigid, technocratic and abstract, something which is the very opposite of the organic flexibility and personal relevance commonly assumed to be characteristic of literature. This charge can (and should) be countered on two levels. Firstly, there is no rule which states that methodological and theoretical frames should share features with the intended ‘objects’ of study. In fact, such overlaps, perhaps best epitomized in literary studies by discussions about the persistence of the so-called ‘Romantic Ideology’ in both literature *and* literary studies,¹ are highly problematic, and the scientific study of literature should profit from interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and methodological self-consciousness. Secondly, systems theory is not simply abstract and reductive system building. One should not forget that systems-theoretical concepts have their origins in (neuro-)biology and physics and are largely derived from empirical observations. It is only in a second step that attempts have been made to find analogies between chemical and thermodynamic processes or cellular life forms on the one hand and matters of ecology, society, mind and culture on the other. Such analogies have become possible because in recent years systems-theoretical thought has become ever more complex by acknowledging the fundamental importance of self-reference, self-organization and autopoiesis, thus managing to explain how systems can

Correspondence: Christoph Reinfandt, Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel, Englisches Seminar, Olshausenstr. 40, D-24098 Kiel, Germany. E-mail: reinfandt@anglistik.uni-kiel.de

¹ Cf. Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

combine operative closure and autonomy with openness to their environment.² Does this not sound like a promising model for coming to terms with (among other things) literature's strange balance of self-regulation and heterogeneity or the notorious undefinability of literariness?

1. LITERATURE AS SYSTEM

How, then, can literature be conceived of as system? The term system seems to be common enough in literary studies, either in the more specific sense of language as system/structure, text as system/structure, sign system, semiotic system, and symbolic system, or in a more generalized sense such as in the observation that 'both women and their works were part of the literary system of Renaissance England.'³ As these examples indicate, all kinds of things can be regarded as elements of systems, ranging from linguistic or textual features via signs and symbols to women and works. The question is which elements might most suitably form the basis for a comprehensive systems model of literature.

Elaborated systems-theoretical approaches to literature tend to concur that literature should be viewed as a complex mode of systemic interaction or communication in a multi-dimensional systemic environment. Nevertheless, their answers to the question of who or what interacts or communicates are quite diverse. Piotr Sadowski's recent systematic outline of a systems-theoretical approach to the study of literature,⁴ for example, conceives of literature fairly straightforwardly as interaction between author, text, and reader, and both author and reader on the one hand and text on the other hand are described as systems, albeit of differing complexity. Sadowski insists on the temporal sequence of this interaction and thus

² Self-organization and autopoiesis mark two different aspects of self-reference. Autopoiesis describes self-reference with regard to a system's ongoing and strictly immanent (re-)production of its elements. Accordingly, the term refers to a mode of organization which is characteristic of a system and determines its identity. Self-organization, on the other hand, describes self-reference with regard to a system's translation of impulses from its environment into immanently produced structures which are constantly modified while the basic organization/identity of the system remains unchanged.

³ Diane Purkiss, ed., *Renaissance Women: The Plays of Elizabeth Cary. The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer* (London: Pickering, 1994), p. vii.

⁴ Piotr Sadowski, *Systems Theory as an Approach to the Study of Literature: Origins and Functions of Literature* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999). Sadowski's approach takes its fundamental categories from Marian Mazur's cybernetic theory of autonomous systems (1966) and his qualitative theory of information (1970). Both are only available in Polish.

emphasizes the anthropological and psychological functions of literature with special reference to the primacy of literary production. As a consequence of this particular focus, matters of literary reception are largely viewed in terms of understanding vs. incomprehension, overinterpretation or misunderstanding, and meaning becomes a matter of control.⁵ It could be argued that such a view fails to acknowledge a significant peculiarity of literary communication, namely that literary reception can fulfil the very same functions Sadowski describes without *necessarily* reproducing or mirroring meanings which had their part in the production of a particular text. Sadowski's answer to the question 'What is literature?', on the other hand, turns out to be highly stimulating and highly flexible, placing literature on a map that includes all kinds of linguistic artefacts.⁶

A more abstract approach, which views literature in a semiotic frame of reference and takes its inspiration from a combination of Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory with ideas first formulated in Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism, was inaugurated by Itamar Even-Zohar in the late 1960s and has since been developed by scholars from Tel Aviv and elsewhere as 'Polysystem Theory' and 'Polysystem Studies'.⁷ Here, literature is conceived of as a complex whole of systems (such as language and cultural repertoires of norms and values) within an even larger complex whole of systems (such as a particular nation/national tradition/national culture), and the emphasis clearly lies on aspects of dynamic openness, mutual interdependence and heterogeneity. Accordingly, it is no wonder that one field of inquiry in which 'Polysystem Theory' has been particularly successful is the study of literary translation as an instance of interference between different literary polysystems.

Meanwhile in Germany, attempts have been made to develop a new paradigm of literary studies based on sociological adaptations of systems-theoretical thought by Talcott Parsons and, later, Niklas Luhmann. In analogy to the differences between these two varieties of sociological systems theory, there are two basic orientations of systems theory in

⁵ Cf. Sadowski's contribution to the present volume below. Perhaps Sadowski's longing for a normative concept of meaning is symptomatic of the 'scientific' appeal of systems theoretical approaches in the humanities. However, it is not a consequence inherent in the theory.

⁶ See Sadowski, *Systems Theory as an Approach to the Study of Literature* 1999, p. 150 and Piotr Sadowski, 'What Is Literature? – A Systems Definition', *Semiotica* 123 (1999), 43–58.

⁷ Cf. Itamar Even-Zohar, 'Polysystem Studies', Special Issue of *Poetics Today* 11,1 (1990), 1–268; José Lambert, 'Itamar-Even Zohar's Polysystem Studies: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Culture Research', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 24,1 (1997), 7–14.

German literary studies. The adherents of an 'Empirical Science of Literature' (ESL) as inaugurated by Siegfried J. Schmidt⁸ try to retain Parsons's combination of systems theory and action theory and are thus critical of Luhmann, who suggests that (systemic) communication should be viewed independently of (human) action. Within ESL, the literary system consists of the sum total of all observable communicative acts which can be assigned to individuals in four particular roles of social communicative interaction, i.e. the production, distribution, reception or processing (writing reviews or scientific articles, teaching, etc.) of literary texts. Later developments in the field have been somewhat schizophrenically marked by an increasing theoretical orientation towards constructivism and the cognitive sciences on the one hand, and an openness to less theoretically advanced empirical research from other disciplines such as sociology and psychology on the other.⁹ Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the approach is its programmatic anti-hermeneutical stance, which problematizes many of the traditional pursuits of literary studies, such as reading texts and the writing of literary history based exclusively on the reading of texts.¹⁰

On the other hand, the 'new paradigm' of systems theory and literature which Dietrich Schwanitz confidently proclaimed in 1990¹¹ had an explicitly Luhmannian frame of reference.¹² The German sociologist Niklas

⁸ Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Grundriß der Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* (1980) (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1991). English translation: *Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literature: The Components of a Basic Theory*, trans. R. de Beaugrande (Hamburg: Buske, 1982).

⁹ Schmidt himself has persistently tried to induce and maintain an adequate level of methodological self-consciousness and theoretical innovation in ESL. One of the centrepieces in this enterprise has been his continuous critical analysis of Luhmann's ideas. See, for example, his 'How to Balance Open Accounts: Some Requirements for a Further Development of the Empirical Study of Literature' in *The Empirical Study of Literature and the Media: Current Approaches and Perspectives*, eds. Susanne Janssen and Nel van Dijk (Rotterdam: Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doorn & Co's, 1998), 92–108.

¹⁰ While many ESL scholars remain hostile to the writing of literary history on principle, it is again Siegfried J. Schmidt who tried to come up with a mode of writing literary history that is compatible with ESL standards. Cf. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1989).

¹¹ Dietrich Schwanitz, *Systemtheorie und Literatur: Ein neues Paradigma* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990).

¹² Schwanitz has also written accessible English introductions to Luhmann's theory. Cf., for example, Dietrich Schwanitz, 'Systems Theory According to Niklas Luhmann: It's Environment and Conceptual Strategies', *Cultural Critique* 30 (1995), 137–70.

Luhmann rose to fame in the early seventies in a debate with Jürgen Habermas¹³ and triumphantly concluded his 30-year project of a comprehensive systems theory of society with the great synthesis of his (as yet untranslated) *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* in 1997, one year before his death.¹⁴ The centrepiece of his theory, *Soziale Systeme*,¹⁵ was published in 1984 and marked the incorporation of the notion of autopoiesis¹⁶ into his theoretical design, leading to a description of modern society as a system of communications that reproduce themselves autopoetically. Thus, Luhmann emphatically emancipated communication from (human) action.¹⁷ After this step had been taken, Luhmann illustrated the universal scope of his theory in innumerable articles and a number of monographs dealing with particular subsystems of modern society such as economy, science, law, and art,¹⁸ while a second set of studies focused on the rela-

¹³ Cf. Eva Knodt, 'Toward a Non-Foundationalist Epistemology: The Habermas/Luhmann Controversy Revisited', *New German Critique* 61 (1994), 77–100. The programmatic side of Luhmann's sociological work is perhaps best captured in his motto of 'sociological enlightenment' Cf. his collection of articles *Soziologische Aufklärung*, 6 vols. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1970-1995) and in topical books such as *Ökologische Kommunikation: Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen?* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986). English translation: *Ecological Communication*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Polity Press and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1997) 2 vols. For a brief summary and appreciation of Luhmann's achievement as compared to (again) Habermas and (in passing) Giddens and Bourdieu cf. Andreas Hess, "'What Is Actually So Distinctively Societal About Society?'" Niklas Luhmann's *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 25,1 (1999), 123–30.

¹⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1984). English translation: *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Cf. note 2. The concept was first formulated in the early seventies in the context of Humberto Maturana's and Francesco Varela's biology of cognition.

¹⁷ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 'What Is Communication?', *Communication Theory* 2 (1992), 251–9.

¹⁸ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), *Das Recht der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1995). Except for *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), none of these specialized studies have as yet been translated into English. Completed but somewhat unrevised manuscripts on politics and religion have been published posthumously: *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000) and *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000).

tionship between social structure and cultural semantics.¹⁹ With regard to Luhmann's seemingly outdated claim to universality, it is important to note that his theory is explicitly based on a concept of difference which replaces traditional regulative notions of identity. In its radical anti-essentialism it is not so very far away from deconstruction, but it replaces deconstruction's focus on language/text with a very different focus on observation/communication.²⁰ Emphatically embracing the self-reflexiveness of epistemological constructivism,²¹ Luhmann's theory is thus definitely part of the vanguard of contemporary theory.

One of the main attractions of Luhmann's ideas for an adaptation in literary studies is the pronounced historical emphasis of what is arguably the most elaborated and inclusive theory of modernity available so far.²² As a consequence, appropriations in German literary studies have spawned a number of monographs focusing on the modernization of German literature in the 18th century and beyond.²³ In view of the dynamic of the early stages

¹⁹ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion: Zur Codierung von Intimität* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1982). English translation: *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Polity Press and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). His smaller-scale studies have been collected as *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1980/81/89/95) 4 vols.

²⁰ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 'Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing', *New Literary History* 24,4 (1993), 763–82 and 'The Paradox of Observing Systems', *Cultural Critique* 31 (1995), 37–55. For a general introduction and a placing of Luhmann on the 'postmodern' map cf. Stephan Fuchs, Douglas A. Marshall, 'Across the Great (and Small) Divides', *Soziale Systeme* 4 (1998), 5–30. While deconstructionists and poststructuralists are generally hostile to Luhmann's theory, charging it with totalisation and artificial rigidity, systems theorists have become increasingly open for a critical engagement with deconstruction. Cf. *Differenzen: Systemtheorie zwischen Dekonstruktion und Konstruktivismus*, eds. Henk de Berg and Matthias Prangel (Tübingen/Basel: Francke 1995); Benjamin Marius, Oliver Jahraus, *Systemtheorie und Dekonstruktion: Die Supertheorien Niklas Luhmanns und Jacques Derridas im Vergleich* (Siegen: LUMIS-Publications, 1997); Natalie Binczek, *Im Medium der Schrift: Zum dekonstruktiven Anteil in Luhmanns Kommunikations- und Medientheorie* (München: Fink, 2000). See also Benjamin Marius Schmidt's contribution to the present volume below.

²¹ See, for example, Luhmann's understanding of science in 'The Modernity of Science', trans. Kerstin Behnke, *New German Critique* 61 (1994), 9–23 (transl. of ch. 10 of Luhmann, *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*).

²² Cf., for example, Niklas Luhmann, *Beobachtungen der Moderne* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992). English translation: *Observations on Modernity*, trans. William Wobrey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); 'The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society', *Social Research* 43 (1976), 130–52; 'Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?' *Cultural Critique* 30 (1995), 171–86. See also Harro Müller, 'Luhmann's Systems Theory as a Theory of Modernity', trans. Larson Powell, *New German Critique* 61 (1994), 39–54.

²³ See, for example, Disselbeck 1987, Stanitzek 1989, Schmidt 1989, Werber 1992, Englert 1993, Plumpe 1993/95 in Henk de Berg's bibliography below.

of modernization in England, it should be obvious that such an approach could also yield interesting results when applied to English literature. However, except for some pioneering work by Hans-Ulrich Mohr and some essays by Dietrich Schwanitz, English studies scholars in Germany were reluctant to combine Luhmann's flights of theoretical abstraction with the traditionally more pragmatic approaches prevalent in English studies.²⁴ Towards the end of the nineties, however, a number of larger-scale adaptations and applications of Luhmann's theory to English literature have appeared²⁵ so that it may well be time to take stock and present the approach to the English-speaking community of literary scholars in Europe. This is the main emphasis of the present thematic issue of *EJES*, in which five out of six contributions work from a broadly Luhmannian basis, while the customary review section is replaced by a comprehensive bibliography on Luhmann in literary studies.

2. LUHMANN AND LITERATURE

What effects does Luhmann's theory have on an understanding of literature? First of all, literature will have to be viewed in terms of a fundamental structural change that reshaped society radically in a long evolutionary process beginning in the late Middle Ages and reaching a state of irreversibility in the second half of the eighteenth century. The formation of

²⁴ It is symptomatic that Mohr first presented his ideas to German studies scholars. Cf. Hans-Ulrich Mohr, 'Literaturgeschichte als systemtheoretisch und rollentheoretisch orientierte Rekonstruktion der Funktion ästhetischer Erfahrung', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Germanistenverbandes* 30,1 (1983), 18–28. For an extended version of this paper with examples from English literature see Hans-Ulrich Mohr, 'Ästhetische Erfahrung und sozialgeschichtlicher Prozeß: Systemtheoretisch und rollentheoretisch orientierte Überlegungen zu einer Funktionsgeschichte der Literatur', *SPIEL* 4 (1985), 297–350. Schwanitz, on the other hand, managed to make inroads into English studies, even at the annual conference of the German Association of University Teachers of English. Cf. Dietrich Schwanitz, 'Literary History or Socio-Cultural Evolution?' in *Anglistentag 1986 Kiel: Vorträge*, eds. Rudolf Böhm and Henning Wode (Gießen: Hoffmann, 1987), 209–25.

²⁵ Cf. Christoph Reinfandt, *Der Sinn der fiktionalen Wirklichkeiten: Ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf zur Ausdifferenzierung des englischen Romans vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1997); Dagmar Priebe, *Kommunikation und Massenmedien in englischen und amerikanischen Utopien des 20. Jahrhunderts: Interpretationen aus systemtheoretischer Sicht* (Frankfurt/M. etc.: Lang, 1998); Philipp Wolf, *Einheit, Abstraktion und literarisches Bewußtsein: Studien zur Ästhetisierung der Dichtung, zur Semantik des Geldes und anderen symbolischen Medien der frühen Neuzeit Englands* (Tübingen: Narr, 1998).

modern society as Luhmann describes it is characterized by a gradual abandonment of the pre-modern principle of social stratification, which is replaced by the new principle of functional differentiation. This has two far-reaching consequences: firstly, and this is perhaps the most radical of Luhmann's propositions, Man is removed from the fabric of society and finds him- or herself in its environment. In contrast to the preconditioned and comparatively stable identity provided by a person's position, determined by birth, in the social hierarchy of pre-modern society, the identity of the modern individual has to be formed in complex multi-contextual processes of socialization in, secondly, the emerging functionally differentiated and autonomous spheres of communication of such subsystems of modern society as economy, politics, law, education, art, etc. It is important to note that in contrast to widespread prejudice against him Luhmann views the emergence and evolution of modern society as an effect of the co-evolution of psychic and social systems, i.e. consciousness and communication, respectively. Both psychic and social systems are conceptualized as autopoietic systems which self-referentially (re-)produce their elements (single thoughts and single communications, respectively) with the help of a shared evolutionary achievement, meaning.²⁶ Nevertheless, Luhmann insists on the operational autonomy of both psychic and social systems, and in this respect meaning is a strictly functional and relative concept: everything which contributes to the continuation of a system's specific operations is meaningful, but only for that particular system. Furthermore, there is a fundamental difference between psychic and social systems' processing of meaning: while perception and imagination enable consciousness to transform information into meaningful units of experience, there is no such identity in communication. Here, an insurmountable difference between what is being communicated (information) and how it is being communicated (message) has to be successfully synthesized (understanding) in a threefold process of selection, and the identity of experience is not communicable without imposing this difference.²⁷

²⁶ 'Meaning' is the common but not quite adequate translation of Luhmann's term *Sinn* as introduced in ch. 2 of Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme*. For a brief introduction in English cf. Niklas Luhmann, 'Complexity and Meaning' in Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 80–5 and Dirk Baecker, 'The Meaning of Culture', *Thesis Eleven* 51 (1997), 37–51, esp. 39–41.

²⁷ This approach opens up interesting perspectives on matters of incommunicability such as silence, mysticism, paradox, etc. Cf. Niklas Luhmann, Peter Fuchs, *Reden und Schweigen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1989). English translation of ch. 1: 'Speaking and Silence', trans. Kerstin Behnke, *New German Critique* 61 (1994), 25–37.

It should be obvious by now that Luhmann is not stating that communication is possible without human participation. What he does say instead is that communication has its own dynamism which eludes attempts at direct control by psychic systems/individuals, especially in the systemic contexts of modern society. On these grounds, literature can be conceived of as an autonomous, self-referential and self-regulating system of communications autopoietically reproducing themselves. Within this system, impulses from its environment are processed strictly according to the system's own rules so that texts (as artefacts in which a particular differential of information and message is inscribed)²⁸ can have quite different meanings (as generated by particular modes of understanding) in the different systemic contexts that make up modern society. Each of these social systems has to cope with the increasing improbability of communication²⁹ generated by the print-induced weakening of the control line³⁰ between production and reception on the one hand and by the generally increasing multi-contextual opportunities for communication on the other. To counter these developments, each system establishes its own functionally determined horizon of meaning by imposing a secondary, specifically modern, symbolically generalized and binarily coded medium of communication on those media which are generally available, such as language, writing, printing, and, of late, the electronic media.³¹ For

²⁸ A careful reconstruction of the particular historical difference of text and context which determines selections on the levels of both information and message is the aim of the Luhmann-based so-called 'Leiden model' of an 'objective scientific' understanding of texts. See the editors' contributions in *Kommunikation und Differenz: Systemtheoretische Ansätze in der Literatur- und Kunstwissenschaft*, eds. Henk de Berg and Matthias Prangel (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993). As might be expected, the aspiration to scientific objectivity and the one-sided orientation towards the production of texts came in for heavy criticism. Cf. Tannelie Blom, Ton Nijhuis, 'Sinn und Kunst: Die Umarmung Niklas Luhmanns durch die Literaturtheorie und Kunstgeschichte' and Lutz Kramaschki, 'Das einmalige Aufleuchten der Literatur: Zu einigen Problemen im "Leidener Modell" systemtheoretischen Textverstehens. Both in *Differenzen: Systemtheorie zwischen Dekonstruktion und Konstruktivismus*, eds. de Berg/Prangel, 247-74 and 275-301.

²⁹ Cf. Niklas Luhmann, 'The Improbability of Communication' in Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*, 86-98.

³⁰ I have taken up this term from Piotr Sadowski's contribution to the present volume below to suggest that there is some degree of compatibility between his and Luhmann's categories.

³¹ Luhmann pulled together the different threads of his evolutionary theory of communication media in a brilliant chapter of his final magnum opus. See Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, pp. 190-412. He has also addressed the reality-constituting function of the mass media. Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 2nd ed. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996).

example, the medium of money facilitates the ongoing negotiation of +/- ownership in the economic system, scientific publications facilitate the ongoing negotiation of +/- truth in the scientific system, and (literary) works of art facilitate the negotiation of +/- beauty³² or whatever regulative preference one would like to propose for modern art and literature.³³ Meaning in the traditional sense, on the other hand, becomes fragmented and destabilized under modern conditions, as each functionally motivated sphere of communication adapts it exclusively to its specific functional horizon of meaning. It nevertheless persists in the language use of what Luhmann terms 'general social communication', which precedes, prepares and surrounds communication in functionally differentiated subsystems of society.

Accordingly, each social system can be described with regard to three basic systemic references which can be termed function, performance and reflexivity. The level of function refers to the system's relationship with modern society as a whole, in which the emergence of each subsystem is motivated by a specific function no other social system attends upon. In the case of art and literature, attempts to define this function, such as Luhmann's contention that art demonstrates order mechanisms in the realm of the merely possible³⁴, Siegfried J. Schmidt's suggestion that literature should be seen as an attempt to overcome functional differentiation and its concomitant negative consequences for the individual subject and society at large,³⁵ or Gerhard Plumpe's and Niels Werber's laconic answer

³² For a long time his first paper on the systems theory of art appeared in 1976, two of his later articles are available in English: 'The Work of Art and the Self-Reproduction of Art' (1984) and 'The Medium of Art' (1986), both in Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*, 191–214 and 215–26 – Luhmann himself clung to the code of 'beautiful' vs. 'ugly' and he was severely criticized for this (see Gerhard Plumpe and Niels Werber, 'Literatur ist codierbar: Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft' in *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie: Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven*, ed. Siegfried J. Schmidt (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993), 9–43). In his monograph on the art system he signalled slight misgivings but remained noncommittal, preferring instead the merely technical distinction of a positive preference-value as opposed to a negative reflection-value (e.g. Luhmann, *Kunst der Gesellschaft*, p. 159).

³³ Plumpe/Werber, for example, draw upon Friedrich Schlegel to suggest that 'interestingness' would be a less normative and thus more suitable preference-value for modern art and literature. Accordingly, their suggestion for the code of literary communication is 'interesting' vs. 'boring'. Cf. their 'Literatur ist codierbar: Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft', 30–32.

³⁴ See Luhmann, *Kunst der Gesellschaft*, p. 238.

³⁵ See Schmidt, *Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, p. 418.

‘entertainment’³⁶, tend to illustrate that the functional dimension of art and literature is closely intertwined with the emerging needs of modern individuals.³⁷

These, however, belong to the level of performance, which regulates a system’s relationship with other systems in its environment. On this level, the manifold relations between literature and other social systems³⁸ can be balanced against literature’s peculiar interrelation with psychic systems,³⁹ which is based on an asymmetric mode of inclusion. Only the minority of psychic systems which base new literary selections on their reading (i.e. authors who produce new texts) can be described as actively socialized in the literary system, while the majority of psychic systems involved in literary communication are passively socialized: they do their reading in private or other contexts, and resulting communicative selections take place outside the literary system, either as ‘general social communication’ or in other social systems such as the mass media, education, or science. The feedback from these selections into the literary system is highly indirect, and the overall effect of this particular mode of inclusion is a high degree of semantic and formal flexibility in literary communication.⁴⁰

Finally, the level of reflexivity determines a system’s identity by means of self-observation and self-description, and it is on this level that the question of literariness will have to be answered. In Luhmann’s terms,

³⁶ See Plumpe/Werber, ‘Literatur ist codierbar: Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft’, pp. 32–5.

³⁷ See also Philipp Wolf’s and Peter Hühn’s contributions to the present volume below.

³⁸ For an approach which focuses on this network of reciprocal relations and interferences between autonomous social systems see the outline of a polycontextural study of literature in *Beobachtungen der Literatur: Aspekte einer polykontexturalen Literaturwissenschaft*, eds. Gerhard Plumpe and Niels Werber (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995).

³⁹ On the theoretical basis for this design cf. Niklas Luhmann, ‘Perception and Communication through Artworks’ in *STILLSTAND switches: Gedankenaustausch zur Gegenwartskunst/Exchange of Ideas on Contemporary Art*, eds. Harm Lux and Philip Ursprung (Zürich: [no publisher], 1992), 75–84; Christoph Reinfandt, ‘Integrating Literary Theory: Systems-Theoretical Perspectives of Literature and Literary Theory’, *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 28 (1995), 55–64; Reinfandt, *Der Sinn der fiktionalen Wirklichkeiten*, pp. 29–41. For a systems-theoretical model with a strong orientation towards psychic systems see Bernd Scheffer, *Interpretation und Lebensroman: Zu einer konstruktivistischen Literaturtheorie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992).

⁴⁰ The obvious counterexample would be the emergence of modern science with its ever-increasing professionalization and institutionalization. Here, rigid specialization leaves no room for amateurs, all psychic systems involved in scientific communication have to be actively socialized in the system.

this will involve a detailed description of the workings of literature's symbolically generalized medium of communication with its binary code of preference-value vs. reflection-value (cf. notes 32 and 33). Furthermore, a closer look at the evolution of self-descriptions (both on the level of observable works and in the form of theoretical statements or manifestos) will reveal the historical fine-tuning of the system within the larger developments of the evolution of modernity.⁴¹ All three levels of systems-theoretical description can be integrated with the help of Luhmann's innovative concept of meaning, which opens up promising possibilities for combining macro- and micro-levels of scientific inquiry into social and textual dimensions of literature⁴² and into the social framing of aesthetic autonomy.

3. HOW GERMAN IS IT?

It is against this background that the title question of this introduction can finally be addressed, and there are two possible answers, which are by no means mutually exclusive. On the one hand, a brief glance at the table of contents of the present volume will suggest the answer 'Quite!'. On the other hand, while conceding that there is something quite German about Luhmann's 'postmodern' version of the Hegelian enterprise of comprehensive historical abstraction, it is one of the aims of this introduction to suggest that there are many possible points of contact between a Luhmann-based systems-theoretical approach to literature and current debates in literary theory:⁴³ Luhmann's theory shares a fundamental anti-essentialist orientation towards difference with poststructuralism and deconstruction (cf. note 20), its historical orientation could be profitably discussed in the light of the new historicism,⁴⁴ Foucault's historical discourse

⁴¹ See, for example, for German literature, Gerhard Plumpe, *Epochen moderner Literatur: Ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995). Reinfandt in *Der Sinn der fiktionalen Wirklichkeiten* applies Plumpe's model with modifications to English literature.

⁴² This problem has been repeatedly addressed by Claus-Michael Ort. See, for example, his 'Sozialsystem "Literatur" – Symbolsystem "Literatur": Anmerkungen zu einer wissenssoziologischen Theorieoption für die Literaturwissenschaft' in Schmidt, *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie: Positionen, Kontroversen, Perspektiven*, 269–94.

⁴³ In other words, what this thematic issue strives for is 'connectivity' in literary studies as a particular part of the social system of science, *Anschlußfähigkeit* being one of Luhmann's favourite terms.

⁴⁴ Cf. Dietrich Schwanitz, 'Dichte Beschreibung' in *Systemtheorie der Literatur*, eds. Jürgen Fohrmann and Harro Müller (München: Fink, 1996), 276–91.

analysis⁴⁵ or Bourdieu's theory of field analysis,⁴⁶ and its concept of understanding opens up new perspectives on (or even in?) hermeneutics.⁴⁷ It is because of these features, which are of particular interest for future developments in literary studies, that the Luhmannian focus of the present thematic issue on 'Systems Theory and Literature' has been chosen, and it is to be hoped that the brief guide to (some of) Luhmann's ideas (and to his publications in English) provided in this introduction as well as Henk de Berg's comprehensive bibliography appended below will induce and facilitate interest in this impressive theoretical enterprise, making it less exclusively German in the process.

Systems theory in general is, of course, not a predominantly German domain at all, and in this respect Piotr Sadowski's contribution to the present volume can serve as an introduction to some of the basic tenets of systems theory and their possible applications in a semiotic framework. Philipp Wolf's article, on the other hand, illustrates the historical orientation inherent in Luhmann's brand of systems theory: Wolf draws upon Luhmann's theory of modernization in order to describe the functionally determined emergence of specifically modern traits of literature in the early modern age, which he views in terms of a complex co-evolution of psychic systems' needs and social systems' inherent reliance on abstraction and self-reference. This latter point is taken up by Stephan Mussil whose contribution focuses on reflexivity as the central defining characteristic of modernity. Using *Hamlet/Hamlet* as a well-known example, Mussil demonstrates the persistence of reflexivity in both literature and criticism

⁴⁵ Cf. Friederike Meyer, 'Diskurstheorie und Literaturgeschichte: Eine systemtheoretische Reformulierung des Diskursbegriffs von Foucault' in *Vom Umgang mit Literatur und Literaturgeschichte: Positionen und Perspektiven nach der "Theoriedebatte"*, eds. Lutz Danneberg and Friedrich Vollhardt (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992), 389–408.

⁴⁶ Cf. Rudi Laermans, 'Communication on Art, or the Work of Art as Communication? Bourdieu's Field Analysis Compared with Luhmann's Systems Theory', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24,1 (1997), 103–13. Issue 24,1 of *CRCL* is dedicated to 'The Study of Systems and Fields'.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *Systemtheorie und Hermeneutik*, eds. Henk de Berg and Matthias Prangel (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 1997); *Beobachtung verstehen, Verstehen beobachten: Perspektiven einer konstruktivistischen Hermeneutik*, ed. Tilmann Sutter (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997); Oliver Jahraus, 'Die Unhintergebarkeit der Interpretation im Rahmen literaturwissenschaftlicher Theoriebildung' in *Interpretation, Beobachtung, Kommunikation: Avancierte Literatur und Kunst im Rahmen von Konstruktivismus, Dekonstruktivismus und Systemtheorie*, eds. Oliver Jahraus and Bernd Scheffer (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999 (*Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, 9. Sonderheft)), 241–91.

from the Renaissance to the present and ends with some general observations on different possibilities of literary criticism. Peter Hühn, on the other hand, concentrates on the ways in which literary texts can be read as symptoms of the needs of psychic systems, and he introduces a diachronic dimension by comparing an early eighteenth-century novel (Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*) with an early twentieth century novel (Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*). A similar direct application of systems-theoretical categories to the reading of literary texts can also be found in the two remaining contributions, which, however, focus strongly on the contemporary scene: Hans-Ulrich Mohr takes as his examples and Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a vast American novel published in 1997 to great critical acclaim, while Benjamin Marius Schmidt uses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Salman Rushdie's novels, i.e. classic texts of the highly prominent (post-)modernism/(post-) colonialism debate in literary studies, in order to illuminate what he perceives as a fundamental contemporary paradigm shift with both scientific and 'life-world' implications. With this broadening of perspective, which may serve to illustrate the reach some people ascribe to systems theory, the thematic issue on 'Systems Theory and Literature' comes to an end, and it is to be hoped that it will stimulate debate and thus, ultimately, 'connectivity'.