

Literary Theory: A Survey

Part 4: The Cultural Turn

Lecture 12:

Systems Theory and Literature/Culture

1) Background

2) Literature as System

3) Luhmann and Literature

4) Cultural/Media Studies Perspectives

1) Background

- Systems Theory vs. Literature?
 - the potential of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization and methodological self-consciousness
 - empirical foundations and theoretical reflection
- Basics:
 - recent developments in the natural sciences:
 - the paradigm of self-organization (self-reference/reflexivity/autopoiesis)
 - chemical and thermodynamic processes
 - cellular life forms
 - mind, ecology, society, culture
 - (radical) constructivism:
 - ontological truth vs. 'viability'
 - a theory of observation which reflects upon itself and upon the difference between observation/knowledge and its objects

Terminology:

- 1) 'Difference' replaces identity (substance, essence, origin etc.) as the central term of theoretical reflection.
- 2) Systems constitute themselves by establishing boundaries from their respective boundless environments in order to reduce complexity (→ selection, polycontextuality, contingency).
- 3) After a system has emerged it reproduces its elements by means of self-observation and self-description, fashioning a specific but continually changing structure (→ self-organization) and a dynamic identity (→ autopoiesis) in a process of differentiation which can also include the emergence of sub-systems (→ evolution).
- 4) Complex systems combine operative closure and autonomy with openness to their environment: Self-organisation and autopoiesis mark two different aspects of self-reference. Autopoiesis describes self-reference with regard to the 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 systems remains unchanged.

(cf. Dieckmann 2005)

2) Literature as System

Established usage:

language as system/structure; text as system/structure;
sign system/semiotic system/symbolic system;
literature as system

- ▶ Which elements might most suitably form the basis for a comprehensive systems model of literature?

→ elaborated systems-theoretical approaches tend to concur that literature should be viewed as a complex mode of systemic interaction or communication in a multi-dimensional systemic environment

Schools of Systems-Theoretical Thought in Literary Studies:

a) Piotr Sadowski (1999)

- author-system → text-system → reader system
- understanding vs. incomprehension, overinterpretation etc.
- the problem of control

b) Polysystem Theory (cf. Even-Zohar 1990)

- influenced by Russian Formalism, Prague Structuralism and General Systems Theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy)
- literature 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 national culture)
- emphasis on dynamic openness, mutual interdependence and heterogeneity
- particularly successful in translation studies

c) Empirical Science of Literature (cf. Schmidt 1991)

- influenced by Talcott Parsons' sociological combination of action theory and systems theory
- the literary system as the sum total of observable communicative acts which can be assigned to four roles, i.e. production, distribution, reception, processing
- somewhat schizophrenical development oscillating between an increased emphasis on constructivist framework influenced by the cognitive sciences and an openness for less theoretically advanced empirical research from other disciplines such as psychology and sociology
- programmatic anti-hermeneutical stance

3) Luhmann and Literature

Niklas Luhmann (1927-1998)

- systems theory of society
- rose to fame in the early 1970s in debate with Jürgen Habermas
- emancipation of communication from human action/agency
- rejection of overarching and human-bound principle of reason, which is replaced by systems-specific rationalities ('Systemrationalität')
 - anti-essentialism, constructivism, focus on difference, but replacing the 'postmodern' focus on language/text with a very different focus on observation/communication
- incorporated the notion of autopoiesis in his 1984 *Soziale Systeme*
 - modern society as a system of communications that reproduce themselves autopoietically, forming numerous subsystems such as economy, science, law, art, education, politics, religion in the process
- additional interest in the relationship between social structure and cultural semantics

(cf. Luhmann 2012/13)

Importance for Literary Studies/Literary Theory:

- pronounced historical emphasis combined with consistent theoretical design; arguably the most elaborated and inclusive theory of modernity so far
- the emergence of (modern) literature as part of a fundamental structural change that reshaped (Western) 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 and marked by a gradual abandonment of the pre-modern principle of social stratification, which is replaced by the new principle of functional differentiation
- consequences:
 - 1) Man is removed from the fabric of society
 - 2) the emerging subsystems are autonomous, the only integrating factor is the increasingly virtual dimension of modern society at large

The Co-Evolution on Psychic and Social Systems:

- consciousness and communication share the evolutionary achievement of meaning ('Sinn'), but they are strictly autonomous in terms of their operational principles which are predicated on identity on the one hand and difference on the other: perception and imagination enable consciousness to transform information into meaningful units of experience; an insurmountable difference between what (information) and how (message) something is being communicated has to be successfully synthesised (understanding) in order to make a continuation of communication possible
- the identity of experience is not communicable without imposing this difference; communication has its own potentially alienating dynamics
- the socialisation of psychic systems in social systems will have to be described in terms of interpenetration between systems

Literary Communication:

- (modern) literature as a social system
- social systems which base their communication on texts, i.e. artefacts in which a particular differential of message and information is inscribed), will have to cope with the increasing **improbability of successful communication** generated by the print-induced weakening of the control line between production and reception on the one hand and by the increasing multi-contextual opportunities for communication on the other
 - the emergence of secondary, symbolically generalized and binarily coded 'success media' of communication 'on top' of generally available mediasuch as
 - language, writing, printing, and, of late, the electronic media (cf. Lotman, Barthes),
 - e.g. money (+/- ownership): economy
 - publications (+/- truth): science
 - work of art (+/- beauty): art/literature (?)
- fragmented horizons of meaning vs. recent de-differentiation?
(cf. Reinfandt 2015)

Basic Systemic References:

a) function (for modern society at large)

- demonstrating the possibility of order in the face of intractable contingency (Luhmann)
- entertainment (Plumpe/Werber)

b) performance (for other systems in the system's environment)

- for other social systems ('polykontexturale Lit.wiss.')
- for psychic systems (re-integration? freedom?)
 - 'normal' readers, passive socialisation

c) reflexivity (self-observation, self-description > identity)

- the semantics of autonomy
- the rules for continuation (evolution: variation ↔ selection ↔ stabilisation)
- code: preference value vs. reflection value (beautiful vs. ugly? interesting vs. boring?)
 - historically variable programmes
 - periods of modern literature

(cf. brief application to history of the novel in Reinfandt 2012, 236)

Periods of Modern Literature (German; cf. Plumpe 1995):

[S = Systemreferenz; U = Umweltreferenz]

1) Romanticism [S vs. (U)]



2) Realism [U]



3) Aestheticism [S]



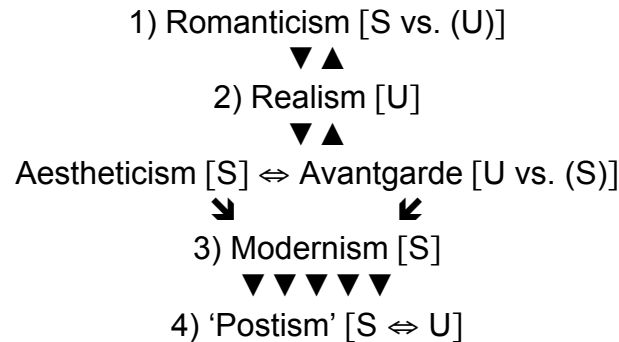
4) Avantgarde [U vs. (S)]



5) 'Postism' [S ↔ U]

Periods of Modern Literature (English; cf. Reinfandt 1997):

[S = Systemreferenz; U = Umweltreferenz]



4) Cultural/Media Studies Perspectives

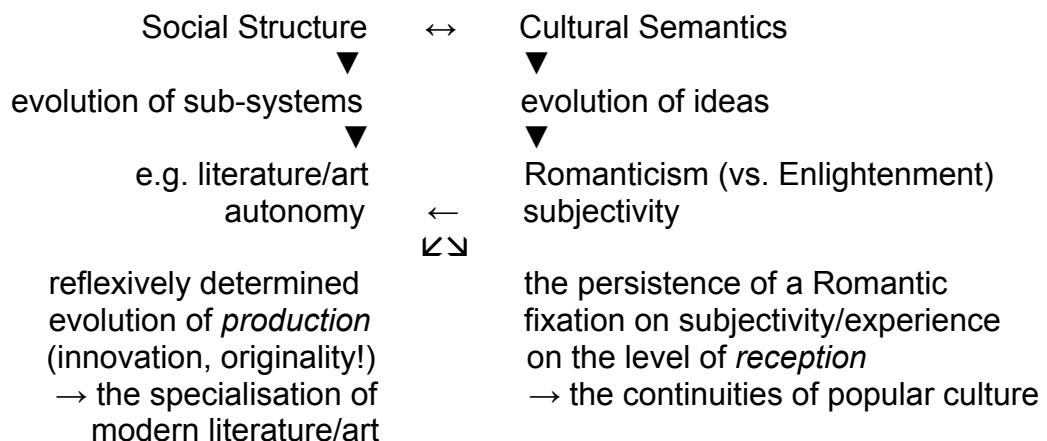
Conceptual Locations of Culture:

practice paradigm > (inter-)subjectivity

text-paradigm > medial storage

autopoiesis paradigm > cognitive systems

► Luhmann: combination of all three dimensions/culture as a historical concept



(cf. Reinfandt 2001b/2003)

Media History:

orality (interaction) vs. literacy (media-based communication)

language
 writing (storage)
 printing (distribution)
 electronic media
 +
 the emergence of
 symbolically generalized 'success media' of communication

(cf. Berghaus 2003, Reinfandt 2012)

"From the perspective of systems theory [...] the terms *form* and *medium* will depend entirely on the plane of analyses selected." (Wellbery 2010, 302)

> The Role of 'Text'?

texture [message]	structure ('prose core') [information]	meaning [understanding]
	reference (world)	↔ mimesis
		➔ intertextuality
		➔ intermediality
↔ 'work'	↔	[objective]
mediality ➔ writing/print	----->	[reflexive]
▲ ↪ form	↔	↓
▲	experience (voice)	➔ orality in writing
▲		➔ authorship
		➔ staging the modern subject

▲ text ▲
 ↑ [interpretation]
 reader

The Texture of Modern Literary Texts
 (cf. Reinfandt 2009, 175; 2011, 75; 2013, 17)

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