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## Conceptual Locations of Culture and the Writing of Literary History

Today few people would doubt that the writing of history is determined by cultural factors. It cannot escape its own present with its very specific sense of continuity and/or discontinuity with the past. Thus, in view of the pervasiveness of culture and of its pertinence to the act of writing itself, the fact that the writing of cultural history makes the very term 'culture' explicit should lead (and has already led) to a higher degree of explicit historical self-reflexiveness. In this sense, a 'cultural turn' in historiography, literary studies and other disciplines<sup>1</sup> is certainly in keeping with clearly discernible self-reflexive tendencies in many spheres of contemporary culture.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, it appears to be, at least from our (cultural) perspective, a good thing.

The problems begin, however, when we try to determine the way in which culture should be made the focus of academic scrutiny. So far, a broad consensus has emerged, viewing culture as "collectively structured meaning"<sup>3</sup> which constitutes the social world and orientates human behaviour; but, all in all, the defining feature of culture seems to be its intractability: culture mediates between the social world and human behaviour from a position that is 'beyond' or 'behind' both levels of observation and can thus only be inferred indirectly and fragmentarily from contingent instances of cultural practice. As an object of enquiry, culture occupies a position somewhat similar to the language system in the linguistic distinction of *langue* and *parole*: the repertoire of culture as a prerequisite of practice can only be reconstructed (or, rather, constructed) from the evidence of practice itself. There can be no doubt, however, that culture is an even more heterogeneous

1 For a very general scientific/theoretical perspective, see Hiley, Bohman & Shusterman, eds. *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*. For a brief survey of developments in sociology, see Roland Robertson's chapter on "The Cultural Turn" in his *Globalization* 32–48. A liberal-minded and brief introduction to the question of literature and cultural studies can be found in Culler, *Literary Theory* 43–54.

2 See Slavoj Žižek, "You May!" *London Review of Books*, for a list of examples of "universalized reflexivity in our lives" (3).

3 Quoted as an English formula for the most widely accepted understanding of culture in various disciplines in Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Kognitive Autonomie und soziale Orientierung* 203.

object of study than language, and in fact there is serious disagreement as to whether culture can or should be considered a system.<sup>4</sup>

The present essay will address this problem explicitly. First, I will use Homi Bhabha's highly influential collection of essays on *The Location of Culture* as a starting point for singling out components of a notion of culture which is currently widely shared. These components will then be reintegrated through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's social-systems theory and weighed with regard to their potential for the writing of cultural history. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this approach for the writing of literary history as cultural history.

### I *Conceptual Locations of Culture*

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha employs a characteristic double move. Focusing on "historical modernity as an epistemological structure" whose "essential gesture" is an "ethics of self-construction"<sup>5</sup> that establishes a communality "*predicated on a transcendent becoming*" (241; emphasis in original), Bhabha describes various systematic "locations of culture"<sup>6</sup> such as (i) "subject positions" (1) with their various claims to identity, (ii) "intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value" (2; emphasis in original), and (iii) "language," i.e. concepts and terms that govern representation and social articulation (2) in a process which he later calls "the signification of cultural generalizability" (137). On the other hand, *the* location of culture as mentioned in the title of

4 On culture as a semiotic system, see, for example, Lotman & Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," and the brief introduction to polysystem studies in José Lambert, "Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Studies." However, the systemic status of culture has been called into question even from within the systems-theoretical camp. "Wenn man nach all dem nun wissen will, was Kultur nun wirklich ist und wirklich leistet, so kann man in fast allen Punkten auf Einsichten des Kultursemiotikers Juri Lotman verweisen, mit einer Ausnahme: die Kultur ist kein System" [If, after all that, one wants to know what culture actually is and is actually capable of, then one can almost always find what one is looking for in the work of the cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman, but with one exception: culture is not a system; trans. Gordon Collier]; Dirk Baecker, *Wozu Kultur?* 155. Baecker takes his theoretical groundwork from the sociological systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*. For a brief introduction in English, see Baecker, "The Meaning of Culture." It is perhaps worth pointing out that Luhmann does not view language as a system, either (*Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* 51); instead, the focus is on systemic aspects of communication.

5 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 239–40. Further page references are in the main text.

6 In contrast to the singular of the book's title, the introductory chapter bears the subtitle "Locations of Culture" (1–18).

the book seems to describe Bhabha's theoretical stance, which, from today's specific historical-cultural condition, endeavours to make use of the gaps in late or 'post-' modern culture in order to stimulate cultural change and variation in an act of actually and actively (re-)locating the culture of modernity from its spatial and temporal – that is to say, colonial, postcolonial and 'postmodern' – margins.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that Bhabha introduces the notion of culture inhabiting an "intervening space" which he terms "the 'beyond'" (1, 4, 7).

However, Bhabha acknowledges the power of what he calls "culture's discursive agency" over "human artifice" (137) and historical factuality. As a consequence, he maintains that it is the task of the cultural critic "to show how historical agency is transacted through the signifying process; how the historical event is represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control*" (12, emphasis in original). In order to describe this "signifying process" that is "somehow beyond control," Bhabha resorts to poststructuralist terminology and argues that "the reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation – *the place of utterance* – is crossed by the *différance* of writing" (36, emphases in original).

What exactly are the systematic components of this double-edged act of locating culture (in the sense of both 'finding' and 'placing' it)? First of all, culture is placed in an historical framework within which it achieves a degree of stability and beyond which it does not apply. However, in the case of modern culture, things are more complicated, because, in a manner of speaking, its essence is becoming. As a result, modern culture will have to be conceptualised as persistently reaching 'beyond' itself. Nevertheless, systematically speaking, culture forms an historically contingent totality of one particular order of collectively structured meaning, and this totality can be described in terms of beliefs, values, ideology, mentality, memory, or symbolic and semiotic patterns and processes, to give a by no means exhaustive list of possibilities. Secondly, culture resides in individual subject positions

7 On the one hand, Bhabha refers to literature in general (Henry James is mentioned in this context) and postcolonial writing in particular as a main source for the project of (re-)locating modern culture (9–18). On the other, he insists on "The commitment to theory" (ch. 2, 19–39) as a means of realising the "postmodern" potential for (re-)locating modern culture. An ideal candidate for the task at hand would seem to be the cosmopolitan postcolonial/"postmodern" artist and intellectual (Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison are his examples) who writes from the "Third Space" of "in-betweenness." But even without this particular and rather literal sense of "in-betweenness" (Western) culture seems to establish a kind of "Third Space" in its own right. Dirk Baecker traces this long tradition of *Arbeit an der Kultur* from antiquity to (post-)modernity (*Wozu Kultur?* 58–76).

and in intersubjective and collective experiences. Thus, cultural communalisation and the resultant formation of organisations and institutions result from a complex negotiation of both potentially disrupting and integrating impulses. In this sense, culture is not a more or less stable sum total of a society's values, but rather a mode of persistent self-observation which negotiates values and possible counter-values.<sup>8</sup> This negotiation takes the form of communication, or, in more abstract terms, signifying processes. Thirdly, culture as a signifying process or, rather, a coordination of signifying processes establishes its own discursive agency that transcends both reality and human endeavour. In the case of modern culture, this autonomy of culture has been strengthened by writing and its proliferation in various media. Emerging modes of communication, which rely on available media of communication (such as language, writing/printing, and the electronic media), generate 'texts' of varying authority and durability.

This understanding of culture, which has been distilled from Homi Bhabha's exploration of *The Location of Culture*, is today widely shared in the realm of "literary studies into cultural studies." The analogies and linkages between 'culture' and 'text' are obviously appealing, and the remains of the onslaught of 'theory' in the 1970s and 1980s have left the field well-equipped for an exploration of this potential. In fact, as Andreas Reckwitz points out in his recent stocktaking of the cultural turn in social theory,<sup>9</sup> 'text' has by now become one fully established paradigmatic focus of cultural research well beyond literary studies, fruitfully interacting with and supplementing the time-honoured but culturally updated sociological and anthropological focus on collective 'practice'. In terms of cultural theory, both paradigms provide different answers to the question of where the collectively structured meaning of culture can be located. While practice-oriented approaches tend to avoid the point altogether or refer implicitly to concepts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, text-orientated approaches provide an unequivocal answer which frees collective knowledge from its traditional entanglement with subjectivity and intersubjectivity and establishes a plausible material location for culture: culture is located in the totality of potentially interrelated 'texts' (in the broadest sense of the term). The functional basis of 'texts' is signs and codes (with language figuring prominently), and the accessibility and durability of these 'texts' is greatly enhanced when they are inscribed in communication media whose func-

8 "Der rote Faden, der durch die Beiträge dieses Buches läuft, besteht darin, eine Kultur nicht etwa als Summe der Werte darzustellen, mit denen eine Gesellschaft ausgestattet ist, sondern als eine mitlaufende Beobachtung, die zu jedem Wert den möglichen Gegenwert bereithält"; Baecker, *Wozu Kultur?* 9.

9 Andreas Reckwitz, "Praxis – Autopoiesis – Text," in Reckwitz & Sievert, eds. *Interpretation, Konstruktion, Kultur*.

tions cover both memory and distribution. While this focus on culture as text and text as culture provides a plausible figure of interpretation<sup>10</sup> which takes a materially accessible and comparatively stable dimension of culture as its starting point, it is nevertheless problematical in its exclusive focus on textuality. Within this paradigm, the question as to how 'texts' came into being in the first place is largely marginalised or even programmatically eliminated, and the workings of 'texts' as culture are also frequently described in terms of mere intertextuality instead of broader cultural terms comprising, for instance, 'practice.' In this regard, it could be argued that the "text-paradigm" of cultural analysis reduces cultural inclusiveness to just one dimension, and it is in this respect that Homi Bhabha's theoretical stance is slightly at odds with his text-orientated descriptive parameters. While, in theory, he argues that his text – *The Location of Culture* – "wrote itself" from the spatial and temporal margins of modernity, this thesis sits slightly uncomfortably with the emancipatory gesture that permeates his argument, stating between the lines that subject positions are important and might even have the potential to intervene in cultural processes, given a sufficient amount of historically contingent looseness in culture. 'Behind' or 'beyond' Bhabha's text lurks a subject position which could be described in terms of textual or even political practice. Even more importantly, this subject position is not merely the result of its cultural location, but it is able to locate and constitute culture actively itself.

This location of culture could in turn be described with the help of the third paradigm of cultural analysis that Andreas Reckwitz identifies, the so-called "autopoiesis paradigm." Starting from cognitive-constructivist assumptions, this approach locates processes of mental construction in cognitive systems as the (multidimensional) origin of culture. It is thus able to open up innovative perspectives of observation, which are nevertheless a kind of decentred and de-essentialised continuation of traditional approaches focusing on subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Here, the opacity of the subject is relocated between the scientific observation of systemic processes in cells on the one hand and generalising theoretical conclusions on the other. However, in view of the potential of these generalising conclusions, which could also comprise the 'external' symptoms of mental processes, such as 'text' and 'practice,' it seems a pity that the practice of the constructivist approach in cultural studies all too often sticks to the confines of a mere update on subjectivist positions focusing on individual agency and its collective harmonisation.

What emerges most clearly from this attempt to put Bhabha's position in systematic perspective with the help of Andreas Reckwitz's survey of the

10 See Carsten Lenk, "Kultur als Text."

cultural turn in social theory is that each paradigm has its particular theoretical and practical advantages and disadvantages which result in specific order-mechanisms of foregrounding and marginalisation. While this is certainly an unavoidable side-effect of every conceivable scientific theory and method, it is nevertheless a legitimate question to ask whether there are theoretical alternatives that cut across these dividing lines while maintaining the respective merits of the three paradigmatic approaches. A likely candidate would have to be able to make sense of the most accessible dimension of cultural signification, i.e. texts, in a way that does not fall short of the degree of theoretical complexity reached within the "text-paradigm," particularly with regard to the (relative) autonomy of textuality. It should be able to account for the part of cognition in establishing culture, and it should provide a suitable framework for theoretically informed guesses at the consequences on the level of 'practice.'

Astonishingly enough, such a "supertheory"<sup>11</sup> is on offer from a German source; even more importantly, the theory in question, Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems,<sup>12</sup> manages to modernise (or should one say "post-modernise"?) its seemingly outdated claim to universality by replacing traditional regulative notions of identity with a strict theoretical focus on difference as its basic concept. The resulting anti-essentialism is not so very far from deconstruction,<sup>13</sup> but it replaces the poststructuralist focus on language and text with a very different focus on observation and communica-

11 On the term "supertheory" and Luhmann's relation to this teutonic tradition, see Niels Werber, *Literatur als System* 9–14. On the incompatibility of supertheories with special reference to Luhmann and Derrida, see Natalie Binczek, *Im Medium der Schrift* esp. 9–15.

12 For a concise guide to some of Luhmann's ideas and to his publications in English, see Christoph Reinfandt, "How German Is It? The Place of Systems-Theoretical Approaches in Literary Studies," forthcoming.

13 So far, the critical engagement between Luhmann's brand of systems theory and deconstruction has been largely conducted from a systems-theoretical perspective. Luhmann with totalisation and artificial rigidity. For a general introduction and a placing of Luhmann on the 'postmodern' map, see Stephan Fuchs & Douglas A. Marshall, "Across the Great (and Small) Divides." For the debate as it has been conducted in Germany, see: Marcus Hahn, "Vom Kopfstand des Phozozentrismus auf den Brettern der Systemtheorie"; Benjamin Marius & Oliver Jahraus, *Systemtheorie und Dekonstruktion*; Natalie Binczek, "Niklas Luhmanns Kommunikationstheorie," in Reckwitz & Sievert, eds. *Interpretation, Konstruktion, Kultur*; Günter Teubner, "Ökonomie der Gabe: Positivität der Gerechtigkeit: Gegenseitige Heimsuchungen von System und *differance*," in Koschorke & Vismann, eds. *Widerstände der Systemtheorie*; and Binczek, *Medium*. For that rare deconstructionist perspective, see Urs Stäheli, *Simzasammenbrüche*; an earlier English version of the latter can be found in his doctoral dissertation, "Signifying Failures."

tion.<sup>14</sup> The central term of Luhmann's social theory is communication, which is, on the one hand, conceptualised in analogy to autopoietic systemic processes in organisms or the human brain.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Luhmann gained notoriety for his emancipation of communication from both human consciousness and human action. Very much in line with the proponents of the "text-paradigm," he insists on communication as an autonomous autopoietic process that cannot be traced back to human input in any directly causal way.<sup>16</sup> Effectively mediating between the tenets of both cognitive and social constructivism, Luhmann's theory occupies a unique middle ground between the "autopoiesis-" and the "text-paradigm" as identified by Andreas Reckwitz,<sup>17</sup> furthermore, its origins in Talcott Parsons's theory of social action can still be utilised as a contact zone with the traditionally dominant "practice-paradigm" of sociology and anthropology.

In what follows, I will try to explicate some basic outlines of this theoretical approach in order to illuminate the resulting conceptual location of culture and its implications for the writing of cultural history.

## II Writing Cultural History

It could be considered both an advantage and a drawback to use what is arguably today's most elaborated and inclusive theory of modernity<sup>18</sup> as a theoretical frame for the writing of cultural history, and one of the challenges of Luhmann's project is its precarious position between reflexivity and complicity. Secondly, as a sociologist Luhmann writes with a bias towards social structure, and only in the course of a long theoretical evolution does the complexity of his theory ultimately do away with the sociological notion that social structure determines everything else (including culture). In its final formulation, however, the theory focuses on a complex multidimensional simultaneity and mutual interdependence of social structure, culture and human agency.

14 See Luhmann, "Deconstruction as Second-Order Observing"; see also note 4 above.

15 One of Luhmann's most avid readers and critics, whose position is focused on a purely cognitive understanding of autopoiesis, is Siegfried J. Schmidt: see, for example, his *Kognitive Autonomie* passim, or, in English, "How to Balance Open Accounts," in Jansen & van Dijk, eds. *The Empirical Study of Literature and the Media*.

16 See Luhmann, "What Is Communication?"

17 See Reckwitz, "Praxis – Autopoiesis – Text" 42. See also Henk de Berg & Matthias Prangel, eds. *Differenzen*, and Oliver Jahraus & Bernd Scheffer, eds. *Interpretation, Beobachtung, Kommunikation*.

18 See Luhmann, "The Future Cannot Begin," "Why Does Society Describe Itself as Postmodern?" and *Observations on Modernity*. See also Harro Müller, "Luhmann's Systems Theory as a Theory of Modernity."

The starting point of Luhmann's historical design is the largely uncontroversial observation of a fundamental structural change that reshaped society radically in a long evolutionary process beginning in the late Middle Ages, reaching a state of irreversibility in the second half of the eighteenth century, and still going on today. In the course of this process the premodern principle of social stratification is gradually replaced by a new principle of functional differentiation, which has – and this is where Luhmann comes into his own – two far-reaching consequences. On the one hand, Man is removed from the fabric of society and finds him- or herself in its environment (this is perhaps the most radical of his propositions). On the other, society itself becomes ever more complex in a process of internal differentiation which establishes social systems such as the economy, politics, law, education and art as functionally motivated autonomous spheres of communication. As a consequence, the identity of the modern individual has to be formed from the outside, so to speak, i.e. in complex multicontextual processes of socialisation in various social systems. However, the lost unity of this social universe with its strict theoretical dividing line between the consciousness of psychic systems on the one hand and the communication of social systems on the other (not to mention the innumerable boundaries between all autopoietic systems involved in or affected by that dynamic process called modern society) – this lost unity is recuperated with the help of a third theoretical concept: Luhmann views the emergence and evolution of modern society as an effect of the co-evolution of psychic and social systems, and the autopoietic (re-)production of their respective elements (single thoughts and single communications) is based on a shared evolutionary achievement which Luhmann calls meaning (*Sinn*).<sup>19</sup>

Meaning, however, is shared only as a strictly functional and relative concept: everything that contributes to the continuation of a system's specific operations is meaningful, but only for that particular system. Furthermore, Luhmann posits a fundamental difference between the modes of processing meaning characteristic of psychic systems on the one hand and of social systems on the other: while perception and imagination enable consciousness to transform information into meaningful units of experience, there is no such identity in communication, where an insurmountable difference between what is being communicated (information) and how it is being communicated (message) has to be successfully synthesised (understanding) in the process itself. Thus, the identity of experience is not com-

<sup>19</sup> See Luhmann, *Social Systems* ch. 2 and the essay "Complexity and Meaning" in his *Essays on Self-Reference*.

municable without imposing the difference of the threefold process of selection that is characteristic of communication.<sup>20</sup> Here, obviously, is a very plausible theoretical explanation for a number of typically modern cultural phenomena such as alienation, contingency, fragmentation, pluralism and relativism. But if these are the signature(s) of modernity, how does modern society – which Luhmann defines as a system of communications that reproduce themselves autopoietically – manage to keep up its constitutive systemic function, i.e. the coercion of elementary communicative events into larger processes of differentiated selectivity? This question is even more pressing in view of the fact that the centrality of writing and especially printing in modern society promulgates and intensifies the instability of the communicative difference of information and message, making communication increasingly unlikely and contingent in the process.<sup>21</sup> One answer to this question is provided by a specifically modern concept of culture, which, as Luhmann points out, is "apparently [...] well suited to incorporating heterogeneity."<sup>22</sup>

Culture in this sense seems to be the historical realisation of Luhmann's theoretical and strictly functional concept of meaning.<sup>23</sup> Assuming that the increasingly complex systemic character of modern communication calls for a level of mediation between interaction and language, Luhmann initially describes culture as a stock of "topics" whose accessibility for purposes of communication he calls semantics.<sup>24</sup> Quite a number of his studies focus on the relationship between social structure and cultural semantics, offering interesting perspectives on several aspects of the emergence of modern society, such as the evolution of a specifically modern understanding of love,<sup>25</sup> anthropology, time, teleology, law, education, individuality, politics and nature.<sup>26</sup> In these studies, there are occasional glimpses of that time-honoured sociological habit of putting social structure first.<sup>27</sup> These are, how-

<sup>20</sup> See Luhmann, "Speaking and Silence."

<sup>21</sup> See above, notes 16 and 20, and Luhmann, "The Improbability of Communication" in *Essays* 80–85.

<sup>22</sup> Luhmann, *Observations* 100.

<sup>23</sup> It is, however, quite striking that the term did not figure explicitly in the titles of Luhmann's publications until comparatively late in his career – see his "Kultur als historischer Begriff" (1995) and "Religion als Kultur," (1996). The sociologist Dirk Baecker argues that Luhmann's avoidance of culture is due to a far-reaching functional equivalence between modern culture and Luhmann's brand of sociological systems theory; Baecker, *Wozu Kultur?* 148–49.

<sup>24</sup> See Luhmann, *Social Systems* ch. 4, end of section VII.

<sup>25</sup> See Luhmann, *Love as Passion*.

<sup>26</sup> These smaller-scale studies have been collected as *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*.

<sup>27</sup> See Urs Stäheli, "Die Nachträglichkeit der Semantik," and Werner Kogge, "Semantik und Struktur," in Reckwitz & Siewert, eds. *Interpretation, Konstruktion, Kultur* 67–99.

ever, remedied by the overall design, which describes meaning as the medium of the social structure of modernity and culture as its simultaneous, historically contingent realisation.<sup>28</sup> Cultural inscriptions of form into the generally available medium of meaning feed back into the availability of the medium, and they are particularly relevant for the emergence of systems-specific horizons of meaning in different social systems. Culture in this sense functions as a mode of realising the fundamental difference between actuality and possibility that is characteristic of meaning.<sup>29</sup> As an historical term,<sup>30</sup> culture marks a typically modern mode of second-order observation. It reflects the all-encompassing contingency of modern society and compensates for this by its memory function and by providing options for emphatic yet contingent authentication. The most obvious field of emphatic cultural authentication is modern art. On the other hand, however, emphatic authentication blocks reflexivity and in this respect appears to Luhmann as one of the worst terms that ever came into being.<sup>31</sup>

What are the implications of this understanding of culture for the writing of cultural history? Obviously, what we have here is a kind of large-scale historical metanarrative culminating in today's pluralism and increased reflexivity (as epitomised by the theory itself). The advantage, conversely, is that all this is explicitly reflected in the theory, which furthermore negotiates a subtle balance between differentiation and integration. Cultural phenomena can be described on their own terms and in context, and both descriptions work within a single terminological frame, thus ensuring communicative connectivity (once the idiom is mastered, at least). While the focus of Luhmann's historical studies is on text in a fairly traditional sense and the focus of his theoretical approach in general is firmly on what one could call the macro-centre(s) of modernity, it is nevertheless promising to explore details, margins and peripheries from a vantage point of securely but dynamically charted territory: once you have a grasp of the centre, it is perhaps easier to go for the margins. In this sense, the occasionally levelled charge of "the cultural poverty of systems theory"<sup>32</sup> could be deflected by a programmatic widening of perspective, which would entail, for example, a systems-theoretical approach to the postcolonial condition or to non-Western societies in contact with Western modernity (the so-called Rushdie Affair springs to mind). Secondly, keeping up a dialogue with cognitive con-

<sup>28</sup> In theory, if not always in practice, Luhmann was unequivocally clear about this as early as 1982: see the Preface to *Love*.

<sup>29</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems* ch. 2, section VI.

<sup>30</sup> Luhmann, "Kultur."

<sup>31</sup> See Luhmann, *Art as Social System* ch. 6, section I, and ch. 7, section I.

<sup>32</sup> See Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, "Gilbert and Sullivan, or the Cultural Poverty of Systems Theory."

structivism, psychology and other disciplines could widen the scope of the theory towards a less consciousness-focused description of the transformation of psychic systems' experiences of modernity into cultural semantics. Thirdly, 'textuality' can be contextualised in terms of the complex relations between social systems. Meaning in the traditional sense, for example, becomes fragmented and destabilised under modern conditions because each functionally motivated sphere of communication adapts it exclusively to its specific functionally determined horizon of meaning. From a systems-theoretical point of view, this social framing of meaning may serve to explain the contextual dimensions of the instability of meaning brought about by the gap between signifier and signified that was marked in general terms by deconstructionists and poststructuralists.

According to Luhmann, the social framing of meaning is accomplished on the level of communication media: generally available communication media such as language, writing/printing and the electronic media are supplemented by secondary, symbolically generalised and binarily coded communication media specific to each system. For example, the medium of money negotiates +/- ownership in the economic system, or scientific publications facilitate the ongoing negotiation of +/- truth in the science system. In view of these two dimensions of communication media, which combine differentiating and integrating impulses, an application of Luhmann's theory in cultural analysis facilitates an even-handed and discriminating observation of both self-referential and environmental dimensions of meaning and communication. Furthermore, the emphasis on communication media could be supplemented by a widening of perspective that takes into account the variety of institutional frameworks that support the operation of various communication media. Finally, the question arises of whether there are dimensions of cultural reintegration beyond or against functional differentiation – for example, a discourse of morality which cuts across several social systems but nevertheless fails to achieve homogeneous validity,<sup>33</sup> or a discourse of popular culture as opposed to the systemic specialisation of high art.<sup>34</sup>

### III *Literary History as Cultural History*

This last question already prepares the ground for a final set of questions, which address the possibilities of writing literary history as cultural history from this vantage point. Can modern literature be described as a social sys-

<sup>33</sup> See Luhmann, "The Sociology of the Moral and Ethics."

<sup>34</sup> See Christoph Reinhardt, "The Evolution of Romanticism."

tem? What is its cultural function? And what do the answers to these questions entail for the writing of literary history?

While the proponents of the Empirical Study of Literature with its background in Parsons's combination of systems theory and action theory have occasionally questioned the possibility of describing literature as an autopoietic system on the grounds of literature's heterogeneity,<sup>35</sup> it is Luhmann's move towards the "text-paradigm" that makes plausible an understanding of literature as an autonomous, self-referential and self-regulating system of communications autopoietically reproducing themselves. Within this system of texts reacting to texts, impulses from its environment (and this includes psychic systems) are processed strictly according to the system's own rules and thus integrated into the system's specific horizon of meaning. With regard to psychic systems in the system's environment, which can be either actively or passively socialised in the literary system (that is to say: as writers or readers, respectively), these rules can be translated into the convention of treating texts as works of art. Beyond this particular systemic context – either in general, systemically unspecified social communication or in other social systems – texts (as artefacts in which a particular differential of information and message is inscribed) can have quite different meanings, depending on the modes of understanding conventionalised in a given context. Within the literary system (and this theoretical distinction applies to all social systems), three basic dimensions of meaning can be distinguished. The level of function refers to the system's relationship to society as a whole, and answers to the question of what the function of art and literature might be<sup>36</sup> suggest that a functional emphasis on adding to the contingency of modern society is compensated for by a close symbiosis with the emerging needs of modern individuals on the level of performance (*Leistungen*), which regulates a system's relationship with other systems in its environment. It is on this level that the manifold relations between literature and other social systems<sup>37</sup> can be balanced against

literature's peculiar interrelation with psychic systems.<sup>38</sup> Finally, the level of reflexivity determines a system's identity by means of self-observation and self-description, establishing the notion of the work of art as the symbolically generalised medium of literary communication and a binary code of preference-value vs. reflection-value valid only within the literary system.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of writing literary history as cultural history, all this suggests a multiple functional orientation which describes literature as an integral part of the overall process of modernisation.<sup>40</sup> In this process, literature performs a paradoxical double function which, in the typical fashion of modern culture, both induces and mediates modern contingency. On the one hand, modern literature demarcates a sphere of communication which seems to be paradigmatic for the cultural condition of modernity at large, in that it is self-consciously conducive to typically modern processes of linguistic and textual self-fashioning.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, this heightened awareness of contingency is mediated by that dimension of modern literature which caters to the needs as well as to the adventurousness of psychic systems under modern conditions, and here we are talking about self-fashioning in a more personal sense. It is in this dimension that a compensatory function is always possible, and it finds its strongest historical expression in all those varieties of emphatic aesthetic self-description which view autonomy in absolute terms and strive to locate art and literature outside society. However, this ultimate act of cultural authentication is again ambiguous, on the one hand holding out the promise of a last resort for psychic systems under pressure, on the other increasing the system's evolutionary dynamic, which could ultimately lead to an alienation of psychic systems.

Do these observations indicate that the central position of modern literature in modern culture is threatened? I would not dare to answer this question in my final few sentences, but at least the dynamic of modern literature as deciphered through the lens of an integrative but nonetheless discrediting theoretical frame suggests an evolution which ultimately reaches 'beyond' itself and perhaps relocates or even dislocates itself in the process. And it may well be this historically contingent state of dislocation

35 See, for example, Gebhard Rusch, "Literatur in der Gesellschaft," in Siegfried J. Schmidt, ed. *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie*.

36 See Luhmann's contention that art demonstrates order mechanisms in the realm of the merely possible (*Art* ch. 4, section II), 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 (*Die Selbstorganisation des Sozialsystems Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert* 418), or Gerhard Plumpe's and Niels Werber's laconic answer "entertainment" ("Literatur is codierbar" esp. 32–35).

37 For an approach which focuses on this network of reciprocal relations and interferences between autonomous social systems, see the outline of a polycontextual study of literature in Gerhard Plumpe & Niels Werber, eds. *Beobachtungen der Literatur*.

38 See Luhmann, "Perception and Communication through Artworks," in Harm Lux & Ursprung, eds. *STILLSTAND switches*, and Christoph Reinfandt, "Integrating Literary Theory."

39 See Luhmann, *Art* ch. 2, section XI. In earlier publications, Luhmann insisted on the opposition beautiful vs. ugly. This came in for criticism from Plumpe and Werber, "Literatur," who suggested the opposition interesting vs. boring.

40 For a recent critique of the advantages and drawbacks of functional approaches to the writing of literary history, see Roy Sommer, "Funktionsgeschichten."

41 See, programmatically and extensively, Renate Homann, *Theorie der Lyrik*.

in a strange realm of the 'beyond' or the 'postmodern' that provides an opening for an active engagement with the historical contingency of conceptual locations of culture.

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