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Reading the Waste Land: Textuality, Mediality, Modernity

Christoph Reinfandt

Niklas Luhmann's ambitious attempt to theorize modernity is centered on notions of contingency and second-order observation, and the historical component of his project combines the notion of the differentiation of society (cf. Luhmann *Differentiation of Society*) with a focus on the evolution of historical semantics (cf. Luhmann *Love as Passion*).¹ While ongoing differentiation entails increasing contingency, the field of historical semantics indicates processes of maintaining meaningfulness and connectivity in spite of the fragmenting dynamics of differentiation, and what little totality is left under these conditions is transposed into the sphere of second-order observation that has been known as 'culture' since the 18th century. (cf. Luhmann, *Kultur als historischer Begriff*) Against this background, and particularly in view of Luhmann's own reliance on reading texts of all kinds as sources for his descriptions of historical semantics on the one hand and his strong interest in media history on the other, it comes as a surprise that no theoretical attention whatsoever has been directed towards the status of texts and acts of reading. In fact, texts with their reliance on historically available media contexts would seem to be at the heart of many of the processes that Luhmann describes, and his notion of "'cultivated' semantics" ("'gepflegte' Semantik") is clearly biased towards written and printed sources. (Luhmann, *Gesellschaftliche Struktur* 19)² What is more, the act of reading a text seems to be very closely related to what Luhmann

¹ While Luhmann's work in this field has been collected in five volumes in Germany (*Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*. 4 vols. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981-95; *Ideenevolution: Beiträge zur Wissenssoziologie*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), only few of these essays are available in English.

² See also Urs Stäheli. "Exorcising the Popular Seriously: Luhmann's Concept of Semantics." *International Review of Sociology* 7.1 (1997): 127-145.

conceives of as second-order observation: Against the background of Western culture's traditional privileging of mimesis, the writing of a text frequently amounts to a first-order observation of the world which can then be observed through the evidence of the text's strategies of (re-)presentation. The following remarks will thus address modernity through such a focus on textuality and mediality, not so much with the aim of exposing limits of Luhmann's theory, but rather with the aim of highlighting the as yet not fully realized potential of his approach for work in this field.

In 1991, the Australian writer Gail Jones published a short story entitled "Modernity".³ This story, which oscillates between essayistic and narrative modes of presentation, takes its cue from a Siberian girl's first experience of a movie in a Moscow cinema in 1920:

She is absolutely terror-stricken. Human beings are visually torn to pieces, the heads thrown one way, the bodies another. Faces loom large or contract to tiny circles. There are severed heads, multiple dismemberments, and horrible discontinuities. The girl flees from the cinema, and as an incidental service to the history of representation writes a letter to her father describing in detail the shocking phenomenon she has witnessed. (Jones, *Modernity* 11)

After this brief opening outline, the story proceeds to imagine the girl's Siberian background in its basic parameters of space, time and setting on the one hand and its particularities of voices, bodies and faces on the other. Interspersed with this variety of world-related dimensions are more general headings such as integrity, density, narrative and identity, and, all in all, the second part of the story constructs a world experienced as continuous and solid.⁴ This is in turn countered by an extended narrative account of the girl's visit to Moscow in 1920 and her unsettling experience in the cinema. The third part ends with the girl fleeing from the cinema, "her screams piano-accompanied" (Jones, *Modernity* 18). This moment is then identified as "a moment of modernity" in the final part of the story, marking the emergence of "a new order of perception" sparked by "unprecedented multiplicity" and predicated on "the metaphysics of

³ "Modernity" was originally published in *Heroines: Contemporary Australian Women's Writing*. Ed. Dale Spender. London: Penguin, 1991, and then included in Jones's short story collection *The House of Breathing*. Perth: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992.

⁴ All the categories mentioned serve as sub-headings in part II of "Modernity." (11-16)

fragments” (Jones, Modernity 18). And yet, the girl’s terror does not last: When she returns home, she does not tell horror-stricken tales of disintegration but instead dwells on the “cone of bright light, a white passageway of floating motes, delicate, enchanting, apparently transcendental, which might, after all, have somehow mystically signified the transit of angels.” (Jones, Modernity 18-19)

Quite clearly, and very much in line with my introductory remarks, Gail Jones’s story addresses modernity in terms of media history with its implications for human beings’ ways of apprehending the world and making sense of it. The following observations will pick up this cue by delineating the broader trajectory of the relationship between media history and modernity with the help of the media component in Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems. The starting point, which will also serve as a focal point and a turning point, is not so far away from the ‘moment of modernity’ identified by Gail Jones. T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* was originally published in 1922 and is thus roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of the cinema, with which it shares the fundamental feature of fragmentation in its mode of production, while the reception of both a film and the poem relies heavily on the viewer’s or reader’s glossing over of this fragmentation. For a moment in the early twentieth century, one could say, modernity came to a head in modernism and a cultural dialectics of fragmentation and defragmentation was clearly visible before postmodernist strategies of glossing over under the general rubric of reflexivity took hold. In what follows, *The Waste Land*, a literary text from this key period of modernity, shall thus serve as a key to specifically modern conditions of mediality and textuality.

The Waste Land of Modernity

T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is definitely the most famous text from the period of high modernism, and, as late as 2008, it is still hailed as “the great prophetic poem of our times” (Grünbein 46) even in the mainstream media beyond academic circles.⁵ This is quite astonishing

⁵ On the occasion of a new German translation. Cf., more generally, in the English-speaking world T. S. Eliot’s inclusion in *TIME* magazine’s TIME 100 (“The Most Important People of the [Twentieth] Century”): “T. S. Eliot: Serious poetry was about to be eclipsed by fiction. He provided the stark salvation of *The Waste Land*,” by Helen Vendler, <http://www.time.com/time/time100/artists/profile/eliot.html> (accessed 4th Nov, 2008).

in view of the poem's infamous difficulty and, what is more, its precarious mode of existence as a text. In the early twenty-first century, the work known as *The Waste Land* is accessible in a variety of editions which, among them, establish three basic modes of existence for the text. T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems*, for one, print the body of the poem, and, subsequently, Eliot's notorious notes without any further elaboration. (cf. Eliot, *Collected Poems* 61-86) More extended academic editions print the body of the poem with subsequent notes and supplement both with the editor's own notes, printed either as footnotes as in Michael North's *Norton Critical Edition* or separately after Eliot's notes as in Lawrence Rainey's *The Annotated Waste Land*. (cf. Eliot, *Waste Land: Authoritative* 1-26⁶) In both editions the editorially enriched text of *The Waste Land* is further embedded in additional material, ranging from a detailed editor's introduction plus extended selections from Eliot's contemporary prose (Rainey) to a 'Contexts' section presenting source texts underlying the poem's rich intertextual frame of reference, essays on the poem's composition and publication history and comments and related essays by Eliot himself, as well as a 'Criticism' section tracing the poem's reception from "Reviews and First Reactions" to more recent "Reconsiderations and New Readings" (North). (cf. Eliot, *Annotated Waste Land* 1-54, 133-249 and *Waste Land: Facsimile* 27-133, 135-280) Last, and by no means least, today's reader might turn to the facsimile edition of the *Waste Land* manuscript. This was, as is generally known, much longer than the published text of the poem which was only brought into being through extensive cuts by Ezra Pound. (Eliot, *Waste Land: Facsimile*)

What, then, is the text of *The Waste Land*? Should the passages cut by Ezra Pound be considered part of the work? Or is it, as its earliest versions suggest, just the poem without the notes as published in October 1922 in the little magazines *Criterion* in England and *The Dial* in the United States? Or rather the version with Eliot's notes published as a small book by the American publishers Boni and Livewright in early December 1922? And what exactly is the status of these notes? Are they 'secondary' or an integral part of the text? And what about all subsequent notes and the supplementary material sometimes attached to them? The average critical edition of *The Waste Land* at the dawn of the twenty-first century runs to close to 300 pages

⁶ 55-70 (poem), 71-74 (Eliot's notes), 75-132 (Rainey's notes).

(288 in North's case, 270 in Rainey's) – is all this part of the text? These questions have been discussed heatedly for decades now and will not be solved here.⁷ But the phenomenon provides a stimulating opening for a mapping of the mediality of modern texts in all their multi-layered complexity.

So how do we read *The Waste Land*? As a 'work,' that much is clear, *The Waste Land* can hardly be identified with one (and only one) textual form. Its multiple mode of existence allows us to see, palimpsest-like, the double layers of writing and printing, and the shift from one layer to the other destabilizes Romantic notions of authorship through its selective implications: Pound's radical editing certainly undercut the authority of T.S. Eliot's modernist genius, and one could perhaps argue that Eliot's notes can also be read as an attempt at re-establishing just this authority from another angle. One can also assume, however, that 'normal' readers would not be disturbed by the basic textual instability outlined above but rather stick to the text(ual version) at hand. And here, schooled by long-established conventions of literary and academic writing, readers would automatically consider the actual poem to be 'primary' and all the rest as potentially helpful but 'secondary'. But then again, the actual poem notoriously resists conventional literary reading strategies. It does not straightforwardly evoke a speaker or persona in an identifiable speaking situation, there is neither narrative coherence nor 'reference' to a unified represented world, and other mimetic modes, referring not to a world but rather to dimensions of perception and experience, are clearly fragmented and decentred.

However, while the poem seems to deliberately undermine normal parameters of making sense, it does not completely foreclose them. Its frame of reference is recognizably split between a vaguely 'contemporary,' i.e. post-WWI setting on the one hand and various historical and mythical layers on the other, and its (re-)presentation of these dimensions seems to be equally split between direct and indirect modes, i.e. voices on the one hand and intertextual and intermedial

⁷ For a seminal survey of the matters at stake in the writing, publishing and reading of *The Waste Land* see Lawrence Rainey. *Revisiting The Waste Land*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

references on the other.⁸ Part of the poem, and especially its ‘contemporary’ dimension, relies on the modern literary tradition of faked orality in writing,⁹ but its proliferation of voices with only vaguely identifiable speakers precludes any attempt at constructing or identifying a unified speaking position. What emerges instead is a collective subjectivity marked by the spiritual emptiness and barrenness of its surroundings as thematized in various registers by the voices themselves, while the world seems to consist only of these voices and other texts. Ultimately, *The Waste Land* is a collage of texts and voices which have been ‘photographed’ into the medium of writing, and its decentring of the traditional foci of making sense of texts (i.e. reference and experience) foregrounds the text’s organization itself.¹⁰ As a network of voices and intertextual references the text assumes stability and authority as an integrated work of art through the medium of printing on the one hand and through the metaphorical resonance of its title on the other, and it is the latter which apparently struck a chord with twentieth-century readers and has continued to do so even beyond the twentieth century, indicating a persistent disenchantment with the fully reflexive turn modern culture seems to have taken in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the text’s techniques themselves seem to have become endemic in the later twentieth century, as the American poet Mary Karr points out in an early twenty-first century assessment directed at a wider public:

The techniques [*The Waste Land*] teaches are reference and irony, self-mockery and obliquity. These are the same ones championed today in art

⁸ While the intertextual dimension draws on all kinds of sources from religious, philosophical and literary traditions both Western and non-Western, an emergent intermedial dimension can be traced in references to music from registers as different as Wagner’s “Tristan und Isolde” (1865) on the one hand and Gene Buck and Herman Ruby’s “That Shakespearian Rag” (1912) on the other as well as to the gramophone. See Juan A. Suárez. “T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the Gramophone, and the Modernist Discourse Network,” *New Literary History* 32 (2001): 747-68.

⁹ Cf. Oliver Jahraus’ seminal study in German on the mediality of (modern) literature: *Literatur als Medium: Sinnkonstitution und Subjekterfahrung zwischen Bewußtsein und Kommunikation*. Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2003. 460.

¹⁰ This is well in line with Eliot’s famous ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry’ and his notion of the ‘objective correlative’ as formulated in 1919 in the essays “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “Hamlet and His Problems”. On the link between modernist aesthetics and the emergence of photography cf. Michael North. “Authorship and Autography.” *PMLA* 116.5 (2001): 1377-85.

and culture at all levels – be it David Letterman’s hipper-than-thou sarcasm or the erotic self-mockery of Cindy Sherman’s photographs. Quentin Tarantino’s nonlinear jumps between scenes in *Pulp Fiction* partly derive from it, as does the oracular, disaffected voice of Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* or the dreamy surface of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. (Karr 7)

Karr’s observations can be traced back directly to the poem’s highly characteristic re-negotiation of the normal parameters of making sense: ‘reference’ in the traditional sense (i.e. to the world) is largely swallowed by intertextual and intermedial references, ‘experience’ is decentred into a multitude of directly represented but seemingly random voices without textual embedding, and the resulting juxtaposition foregrounds the text’s fabric and imbues the resulting work with a sense of irony, self-mockery and, for the reader, obliquity. The text, one could say, refers first and foremost to itself, and only in a second step to something else beyond its boundaries; reference (to the world, to experience, to other texts) has been integrated into its own design.

This, however, only makes explicit what has been a feature of (Western) culture ever since it shifted its main mode of operation from orality to writing. Once writing becomes dominant, the linguistic difference between world and representation is replaced by a new difference between voice and writing, and this new difference reproduces the older difference between reference and sign (which ‘transcends’ the boundaries of language) within written language itself, where it establishes (‘immanently,’ as it were) the difference between signifier and signified which in turn inaugurates its own reality in a realm of (intra- and inter-) textuality.¹¹ In other words: representation emancipates itself from reference by turning away from the world into a communicative sphere of its own, and nowhere has this fundamental writing-induced principle been made more explicit from its earliest stages than in modern literature with its invention of an individualized, subjective ‘speaker’ in lyrical poetry in early modern times as well as its later invention of an omniscient authorial narrator position *within* the text, which proved so constitutive for the emergent genre of the modern (realist) novel. In Luhmann’s terms, then, one could say that these modern literary genres provide virtual

¹¹ For a general discussion of the cultural implications of this shift cf. David R. Olson, *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

observer-positions which can in turn be observed by readers, thus making second-order observation a crucial feature of modern literary communication. At the same time, the fact that these observers are presented as ‘speakers’ cancels much of the reflexive potential of this move by rendering the mediality of the written text as produced by these ‘speakers’ invisible. *The Waste Land*, however, cancels these virtual but embedded, integrative and culturally naturalised literary ‘speaking’ positions and acknowledges the contingency of ‘speaking’ positions in the overall media set-up of modern culture in general as well as its own precarious materiality as written/printed words.

Textures of Modernity

Modernity, then, is to a large extent a matter of ‘texture,’ even if the modes of making sense of texts characteristic of modern culture have for all practical purposes been oriented towards invisibilizing just this feature. To this day, ‘reading’ is – outside and sometimes even within academia – generally assumed to be basically a method of ‘reaching through’ the text itself in order to grasp the unified meaning ‘behind’ it. This hermeneutical mode of understanding texts (and the world) came under fire only with what has been retrospectively identified as a ‘linguistic turn’ in the early twentieth century (cf. Rorty), which in turn turned out to be only the first of a whole sequence of reflexive turns in various dimensions.¹² While the description of cultural developments in terms of turns has been largely confined to the realm of academia, a general increase in cultural reflexivity can surely be seen as characteristic of the trajectory of modernity at large. The evolution of post-Romantic modern literature which culminated in the oblique literary texts of high modernism is an obvious case in point. These radical texts with their apparent absence of content in a straightforward sense, *The Waste Land* among them, forced readers to acknowledge the presence of texture, and this ‘discovery of texture’ can surely be read as a sign of increasing reflexivity in spite of its

¹² A recent study in German has addressed the cultural (and academic) implications of the ‘turn’-metaphor in detail. Cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierung in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2006.

cultural marginality. (cf. Baßler, Entdeckung)¹³ In fact, the discovery of texture seems to be the very moment when the seeds for the radical twentieth-century decentring of reading practices in literary studies and beyond were sown, and it is in this light that the textures of modernity will be addressed in the following observations.¹⁴

What is texture? Beginning with the New Criticism, and thus roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of the oblique texts of high modernism, a distinction between a text's "prose core to which [the reader or critic] can violently reduce the total object" on the one hand and "the differentia, residue, or tissue, which keeps the object poetical or entire" on the other has been established in literary criticism (Ransom, *World's Body* 349): "A poem is a *logical structure* having a *local texture* The paint, the paper, the tapestry on a wall are texture. It is logically unrelated to structure." (Ransom, *Criticism* 648) In principle, this distinction holds for all texts, but it is also clear that texts without consistent structures alert the reader to their texture which, however, cannot be represented in paraphrase (i.e. narrative structures); only when the hermeneutic understanding of the text cannot be achieved does texture become visible, which makes the text interesting for the aesthetically ambitious and for literary scholars, but not necessarily for the common reader. (cf. Baßler, *Entdeckung* 15-16, 193-194) Once texture is visible, however, a number of interesting questions can be asked: Is texture really only a surface phenomenon? Which came first, the 'logical structure' or the 'local texture'? Could it be that the 'differentia' are actually generating the 'core'? Is texture 'process' rather than 'product'?¹⁵

¹³ The broader historical context is elaborated in: Moritz Baßler, Christoph Brecht, Dirk Niefanger, Gotthard Wunberg. *Historismus und literarische Moderne*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996. See also Baßler's entry on "Textur." *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft: Neubearbeitung des Reallexikons der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*. Ed. Klaus Weimar, Harald Fricke, Jan-Dirk Müller. 3rd ed. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007. 618-19.

¹⁴ For an overview cf. Christoph Reinfandt. "Reading Texts after the Linguistic Turn: Approaches from Literary Studies and Their Implications." *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*. Ed. Miriam Dobson, Benjamin Ziemann. London: Routledge, 2009. 37-54.

¹⁵ Roland Barthes has taken both positions. For the traditional attitude cf. his distinction between 'kernels' ('prose core') and 'satellites' ('texture') in "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." 1966. *New Literary History* 6 (1975): 237-62. For the radically new notion of texture as process rather than product cf. *The Pleasure of the Text*. 1973. New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

If one takes these questions seriously, the project of addressing modernity would have to trace the textures of all texts, even of those which do not resist hermeneutical readings, in order to get at the conditions of textuality and mediality constitutive of the world in which we are living and making sense by glossing over the basic instability of meaning acknowledged in recent literary and cultural theory. In its most radical form, texture has in this respect been traced to the level of phenomenology, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out:

Texture . . . comprises an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organization hovers just below the level of shape or structure. . . . If texture and affect, touching and feeling seem to belong together . . . [w]hat they have in common is that . . . both are irreducibly phenomenological. To describe them primarily in terms of structure is always a qualitative misrepresentation. (16, 21)

In the opposite direction, however, texture can also be traced to the level of mediality, as the “array of perceptual data” would certainly have to rely on a material pretext, as it were. In this sense texture is a generative principle of texts in their actually realised shape which in turn depends on available media options with their varying degrees of stability. At a given moment of reading, then, texture points to the available continuum of language/orality, storage and distribution media (writing, printing, electronic media) and larger discursive contexts in which particular textual shapes are more or less likely and/or acceptable. In this latter respect modern literature is of crucial importance in that it provides a stable institutional and medial framework in which writing and printing converge to form materially identifiable units (texts/books) which are then processed according to system-specific rules, establishing the literary ‘work’ as the symbolically generalized medium of communication for this particular context.¹⁶

This latter, additional layer of mediality has so far only been addressed by the media component of Niklas Luhmann’s theory of

¹⁶ On processes of symbolic generalization cf. Niklas Luhmann. *Social Systems*. Trans. John Bednarz, Jr., with Dirk Baecker. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. Ch. 2, section IX; on symbolically generalized media of communication cf. *ibid.* Ch. 4, section VII. For a brief introduction see also Hans-Georg Moeller. *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems*. Chicago: Open Court, 2006. 24-32.

modernity.¹⁷ From a media historical angle, Luhmann addresses modernity as an unfolding evolutionary continuity of media options which increasingly emancipates modern communication from the intentions of its participants. This process of differentiation finds its theoretical equivalent in Luhmann's most radical (and notorious) proposition: With the emergence of modernity, human beings are removed from the fabric of society and find themselves in its environment. Nevertheless, even while the stable identities provided by the social hierarchies of pre-modern, stratificatory societies cease to exist and modern identities have to be formed in complex multi-contextual processes of socialization, the emergence and evolution of modern society will still have to be described as the effect of the co-evolution of psychic and social systems, i.e. consciousness and communication, respectively. (cf. Luhmann, *How Can the Mind*) And the interface between these two autonomous and autopoietic dimensions is provided by the various layers of mediality which also have to compensate for the increasing improbability of successful communication in a continuously differentiating context. (cf. Luhmann, *Improbability of Communication* and Luhmann, *Self-Reference* 86-98) The media, one can see here, are Janus-faced: On the one hand, they provide an ever-increasing range of opportunities for communication, while on the other the writing- and print-induced shift from interaction between present participants to communication across temporal and spatial distances weakens the possibilities of controlling the outcome of the process of communication. The authority over the communicative process, one could say, moves from the 'sender' to the 'receiver' of the message, and with this shift the whole 'sender-receiver-model of communication' becomes highly questionable. In fact, it seems increasingly likely that it is the 'textures' of communication which generate meaning while agency is

¹⁷ An extended presentation of the media component in Luhmann's theory can be found in Niklas Luhmann. *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997. 190-412. Fordham University Press is currently preparing a translation into English. His observations on the mass media (Niklas Luhmann. *The Reality of the Mass Media*. Trans. Kathleen Cross. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; see also Moeller. *Luhmann Explained*. 119-161) occupy a somewhat different position in the overall design of the theory. On the theory's scope as a theory of modernity see especially Niklas Luhmann. *Observations on Modernity*. Trans. William Whobrey. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 and the brief introduction in Harro Müller. "Luhmann's Systems Theory as a Theory of Modernity." *New German Critique* 61 (1994): 39-54.

somewhat diminished both on the producing and the receiving end – and in this sense the concept of ‘texture’ could occupy a crucial position in Luhmann’s theory because of its potential for linking the materiality and mediality of ‘texts’ to human agency *and* to the increasing dynamics of modern communication. Texture, one could say, mediates between psychic and social systems under modern conditions.

Luhmann emancipates communication from (human) action in order to describe modern society as a system of communications that reproduce themselves autopoietically. (cf. Luhmann, *What Is Communication*) Each functionally differentiated subsystem of modern society counters the improbability of a successful continuation of its specific mode of communication by imposing a secondary, symbolically generalized and binarily coded medium of communication on the communication, storage and distribution media available on various primary levels such as language, writing, printing, and the electronic media. Any approach to the textures of modernity would have to take this secondary level into account, as it is here that decisive reading strategies are codified. Modern literature, for example, is on the whole governed by what might be called the ‘wholeness-convention’ embodied in the material dimension of the written work as text or book, but the integrity of the work is undercut by the dynamics of formal evolution, which in turn establishes a very specific (and equally evolving) understanding of modern authorship as the incarnation of the modern subject. The latter, however, is ultimately not the origin of the text or the text’s meaning, but rather a projection on the part of the reader which nevertheless becomes one of the foundational fictions of modern culture.

Figure 1 is an attempt at integrating these mediality-induced dimensions of modern literary texts:

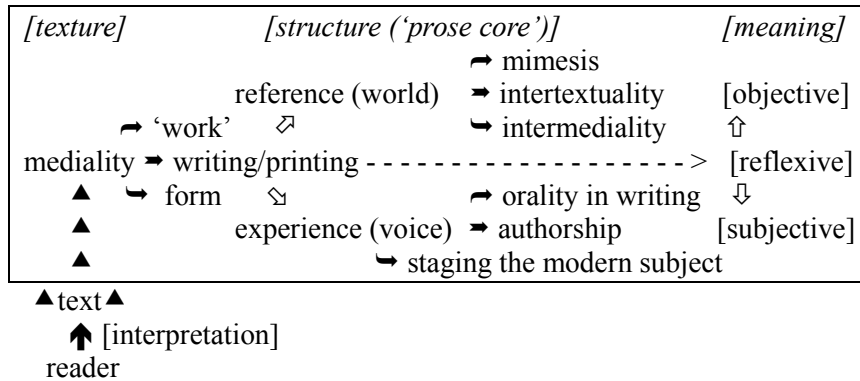


Fig. 1: The Mediality of Literary Texts

Basically, this model suggests, the only dimension of texts that is immediately (phenomenologically, as it were) and materially accessible to readers is texture – all the rest is virtual. A ‘zero degree’ of texture is thus established through the mere fact that a text exists in writing or print on paper or some other material, but obviously a reader’s attempts at understanding a text will not stop there, and even the very next steps move away from the materially present to what might be called second-order conceptualisations. These second-order conceptualisations are partly determined by contextual parameters, such as the assumption that the text at hand will have to be dealt with in terms of being a ‘work’ of literature with all that this entails for a reader’s possible engagement with the level of texture after modernism, for example. On the other hand, the formal features of a text may suggest more or less explicitly that the text’s texture may or should be addressed by the reader. But then again, this alertness is not encouraged by conventionalized forms, and only in the early twentieth century does literary form become individualized enough to draw sustained attention to this dimension.

Texture, then, is largely invisible, even in modern literature. The reader would have to make a conscious attempt at ‘realizing’ it (in its double sense). ‘Normally,’ i.e. outside both (post-)modernist literature and academia, hermeneutic reading techniques prevail, and these are interested in what texts are ‘about’. But even here, the model suggests, things are not as clear as normal readers might wish. The meaning of a modern literary text, even when it is naively assumed to reside in the narrative structures of paraphrase allegedly uncovering a

hidden 'prose core' of the text, tends to be anchored in two dimensions, namely 1) (implied or virtual) reference to the world and 2) (represented) experience of the world. On the whole, modern literature, with its orientation towards emulating orality in writing, has been biased towards the latter, but there have also been programmatic attempts to maintain the illusion of direct reference, especially in the name of realism. On closer critical inspection, however, realism turns out to be largely a matter of voice and thus an instructive example for the complex transformations of older horizons of meaning through the medium of writing in combination with the possibilities of printing.¹⁸ The assumption of reference remains crucial, but under the auspices of writing it works basically through the superimposition of ideology on to representations of individual experience; the emulation of orality, one could say, is supplemented by new strategies of simulating immediate reference through 'naturalised' cultural conventions in larger discursive contexts. Mimesis, then, remains a crucial part of the cultural set-up of modernity, but it is an interdiscursive second-order mimesis fully based on intertextual and intermedial reference. The old-European 'objective' view of the world is thus perpetuated into modernity, but at least in literature it is subjectively framed, while a new and specifically modern understanding of objectivity stakes its claims for general relevance and applicability from a clearly recognizable particularized cultural location in the emerging modern natural sciences. (cf. Daston and Galison)

Against this background, it is tempting to view modern literature's inclusive and integrative engagement with the 'mediascapes' and 'ideoscapes' of modernity as indicative of broader cultural developments.¹⁹ The systematic correlation of the mediality-induced dimensions of modern literary texts in fig. 1 can thus (in an admittedly reductive and purely heuristically motivated move) be traced in the evolution of modern literature from the 16th century to the present, and from here it could be mapped onto the general trajectory of modern culture at large (Fig. 2).

¹⁸ See, for example Ivan Kreilkamp. *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

¹⁹ The terms 'mediascape' and 'ideoscape' have been coined, among others and in a somewhat different context, by Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

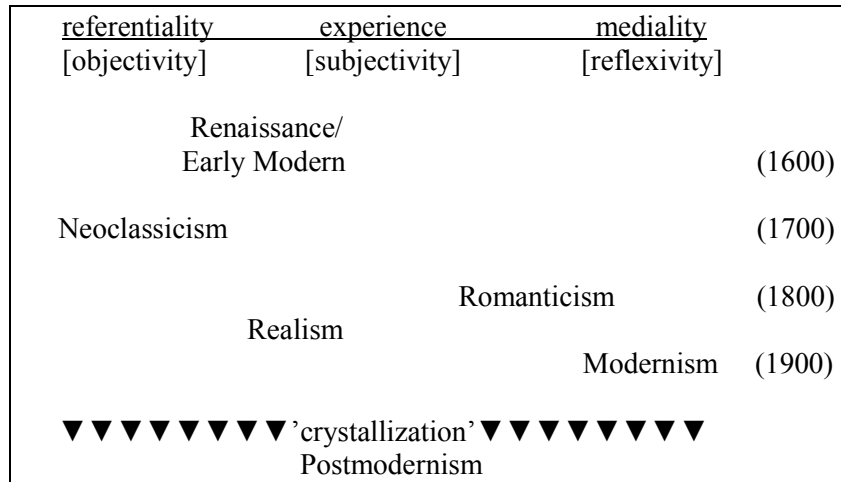


Fig. 2: The Evolution of Modern Literature

On the whole, the evolution of modern literature seems to be clearly marked by a movement from ‘reference’ through ‘experience’ to ‘mediality’ as the foci of literary practice, and these can be correlated to broader horizons of meaning as indicated by the regulative idea(l)s of ‘objectivity,’ ‘subjectivity’ and ‘reflexivity’. As the positioning of the most prominent period designations in literary history indicates, however, the emergence of successive programmatic literary orientations against this background was by no means linear but rather marked by an alternation between modernizing impulses predicated on a shift towards acknowledging the interface of experience and mediality constitutive of modern culture on the one hand and clearly discernible counter-movements marked by retrenching and compensatory impulses predicated on the persistence of a longing for objectivity on the other. In the field of poetry, for example, the influx of subjectivity and its nexus to matters of poetic form can be observed in the evolution of the sonnet from its beginnings (Wyatt, Surrey) through its first heyday (esp. Shakespeare, metaphysical poetry) and on to Milton, which is then countered by the strictly anti-subjective poetic norms of neoclassicism (Pope). This in turn is countered by the subjectivist extremes of a poetics of sensibility (cf. McGann), before Romanticism creates a new synthesis (and a revival of the sonnet form). Romanticism is then in turn countered by the social orientation of realism and the anti-subjective formal (and thus reflexive)

orientation of modernism, in which the modern paradigm of originality and innovation in art and literature as inaugurated by Romanticism comes to a head, as it were: after all conceivable innovations have been tried and tested, how can you still be innovative? Obviously, a new eclecticism and pluralism on a thoroughly reflexive basis would have to become the signature of post-modernist art and literature, in a fundamental cultural shift for which the philosopher Arnold Gehlen has coined the apt metaphor of 'crystallization' (cf. Gehlen 321).²⁰

This dialectics can be read as a reflex of the conditions of mediality in modern culture. The writing- and print-induced emancipation of culture from interaction and reference establishes a world of representation which gradually reshapes human attitudes to the world 'before' representation until, after Modernism, a fully-fledged and all-pervasive reflexivity reconfigures the older objective and subjective orientations for good and an explicit or implicit acknowledgement of the textures of modernity becomes the sign of the times in what has come to be called our 'postmodern' age of fully-realized modernity. As Luhmann has suggested, the discourse of 'postmodernity' indicates that modern culture has finally come round to acknowledging the implications of the dynamics of change underlying its own existence, and the focus on textuality and mediality adopted in this essay corroborates this assumption. (cf. Luhmann, *Why Does Society*)

Reading the Waste Land

The theoretical as well as historical approach to the textures of modernity sketched out in this chapter provides access to dimensions of mediality which have only recently been fully acknowledged in the wake of critical engagements with the increasingly saturated media

²⁰ The full implications of the historical scheme have been spelt out in a number of large-scale German attempts at a systems-theoretical history of modern art, literature and culture along these lines. Cf. Gerhard Plumpe. *Ästhetische Kommunikation der Moderne*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1993 and: *Epochen moderner Literatur: Ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995; Christoph Reinfandt. *Der Sinn der fiktionalen Wirklichkeiten: Ein systemtheoretischer Entwurf zur Ausdifferenzierung des englischen Romans vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1997 and: *Romantische Kommunikation: Zur Kontinuität der Romantik in der Kultur der Moderne*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003.

convergence of the early twenty-first century.²¹ This, however, does not mean that texture as a manifestation of multi-dimensional media conditions did not exist before. In fact, the combination of writing and printing on the one hand and aspects of poetic, narrative or dramatic form in works validated by the context of modern literary communication with its bias towards emulating voice and experience and its preserved impulse of simulating reference to the world on the other is one of the most instructive instances of media convergence *avant la lettre* and marks a decisive step on modern culture's way towards reflexivity. It is my contention that an approach to reading texts modelled on insights drawn from literary examples on the one hand and from the macro-perspective of Niklas Luhmann's theory of modernity on the other can be adapted to media texts of all kinds. In such an approach the term 'text' would have to be emancipated from its traditional connotations which were largely shaped by writing and printing. 'Text' in this more general understanding refers to identifiable units of storage and distribution whose 'texture' mediates between material dimensions of mediality (physical properties of available media; technology; availability; access), usage dimensions of mediality (orality and literacy), and cultural dimensions of mediality (processes of conventionalization; 'naturalization' and symbolic generalization in differentiated communicative systems;²² the correlation of reference and experience through mediality; objective, subjective and reflexive orientations of meaning; ideology).

While fully acknowledging the ongoing cultural validity of hermeneutical modes of interpretation, the suggested critical approach based on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory frames all actor- or agency-oriented approaches to reading in terms of frames (Goffman), fields (Bourdieu) and perhaps even discourses (Foucault) on a more general level in order to facilitate critical second-order observation in a consistent terminological design. Only from such a position can one acknowledge the simultaneity of the construction and delimitation of (textual) identities on the one hand and their deconstruction and delimitation [sic] on the other. (cf. Luhmann, Deconstruction) Every text needs to have a discernible identity in its material dimension, but it is also unavoidably part of larger continuities of intertextuality and

²¹ See, for example Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York/London: New York University Press, 2006.

²² Or, alternatively, discourses (Foucault), fields (Bourdieu), frames (Goffman) etc.

intermediality within larger contexts of communication systems or media systems with their respective procedural identities and functional framings, and it is in this latter respect that the cultural implications of social systems theory prove to be particularly helpful.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a perfect example of this multidimensionality. In unifying moves beyond the poem's texture, content-oriented readings of the poem have frequently opted for a 'referential' focus by taking their cue from the title metaphor, such as Hugh Kenner's seminal reading of the poem as a modernized epic lamenting the death of Europe (Kenner 125-156) and a host of others focusing on the intertextual, intermedial and intercultural dimension of the poem (e.g. Cook 341-355). Alternatively, readings have opted for an 'experiential' focus by relating the poem to Eliot's cultural and/or personal background.²³ And then, of course, there are those readings which focus on the text's organisation in itself or on what readers (and critics) are supposed to glean from it.²⁴ None of these angles – objective, subjective, reflexive – can claim exclusive 'correctness' or conclusive explanatory validity, but at the same time the interplay of angles is clearly indicative of the multidimensionality of modern culture as it is re-presented in its medial textures.

While Luhmann has stated somewhat pointedly that "[w]hatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media," the present approach would suggest that "differentiation as a doubling of reality" works on an even broader scale comprising not only the mass media

²³ This frequently with an insistent American bend: See, for example Eric Sigg. "Eliot as a Product of America." *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*. Ed. A. David Moody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 14-30; James E. Miller Jr. *T. S. Eliot: The Making of an American Poet, 1888-1922*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. It seems striking in this respect that while the 'Anglicised' Eliot of the later 1920s seems beyond redemption from an American Studies perspective, the years up to 1922 (i.e. the year of *The Waste Land*) are increasingly claimed as 'American'. This is illustrated, for example, by the insistence on the Whitmanian elements in *The Waste Land* in various contributions to: Harold Bloom. Ed. *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. Updated Edition*. New York: Chelsea House, 2007. For the personal angle cf. James E. Miller. "Personal Mood Transmuted into Epic: T. S. Eliot's 'Waste Land'." in Bloom, *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*. 49-74 and Miller's earlier *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977.

²⁴ See, for example Jo Ellen Green Kaiser. "Disciplining *The Waste Land*, or How to Lead Critics into Temptation." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44.1 (1998): 82-99 and Adam Kirsch. "Travels in 'The Waste Land'." *New Criterion* 28.8 (2005): 12-16.

but the textures of modernity at large. (Luhmann, Reality of Mass Media 1) Representation, however, is not all there is to it, there is also experience – and this is where modern literature comes in, which facilitates, among other things, the second-order observation of experience, and, while clearly caught up in the business of mediality and representation, tries to account for experience ‘beyond’ these bounds. Gail Jones’s 2006 novel *Dreams of Speaking*, for example, addresses this ‘beyond’ explicitly. While the novel describes the chances and limitations of communication in the modern world, it contrasts these realities with a utopian vision of ideal communication which turns out to be unmediated, a “sympathetic vibration” of “unspoken words” (Jones, *Dreams* 96, 189-191, 214). It seems as if the pervasive virtuality of modern textures springs paradoxically from an urge to get at this ‘beyond’. As one character in the novel puts it succinctly:

The difficulty with celebrating modernity . . . is that we live with so many persistently unmodern things. Dreams, love, babies, illness. Memory. Death. And all the natural things. Leaves, birds, ocean, animals. . . . And sky. Think of sky. There is nothing modern about the sky. (Jones, *Dreams* 65)

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