

Systems Theory and the Concept of "Communication" in Literary Studies

The central issue of several papers in this volume of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* is systems theory as it has been developed by Niklas Luhmann, and its creative and at the same time critical processing by literary scholars of both empirical and historical orientation.

The effort to "empiricize" literary studies is an important goal of both Siegfried J. Schmidt and Norbert Groeben. Their conceptions behind this goal, however, are different. Whereas Groeben tries to transform hermeneutic problems into empirical ones, to introduce the methods of the social sciences into literary studies, and to convince scholars to avoid the confounding of reader and scholar, Schmidt aims at a complete reorientation of scholarly activities. To allow myself a metaphor: Groeben tries to reconstruct a building while making use of those parts which still can be used. Schmidt, on the contrary, pulls down the whole building and constructs a new one. During this process, he pays special attention to the foundations of the building, that is, in the terms of our discourse, to the epistemological presuppositions and the theoretical framework. In "Radical Constructivism" on the one hand and in Luhmann's systems theory on the other, he has found strong pillars to support his building, not without, however, taking a critical position with respect to Luhmann's systems-theoretical contribution.

Siegfried J. Schmidt introduced "Radical Constructivism" as his epistemological choice in the 1980s. The neurobiological framework of his discourse, which concentrated on concepts as autopoiesis, self-organization, self-referentiality, operational closure, and the autonomy of the cognitive system, and which culminated in the subject-dependence of our environment ("reality"), was not easy to accept for his colleagues in the field of literature. Neurobiology and literature were not conceived of as having many aspects in common, and even for the scholars who worked in the empirical branch of literary studies, the hardware of the central nervous system did not immediately offer a solution to methodological questions with respect to experiments with readers. Why should one give up the subjectivity of hermeneutics in order to end up in the subject-dependence of reality?

In the course of the years, however, Schmidt made important efforts to

clarify his position and to bridge the gap between the constructivist foundation of our knowledge and the cultural models which determine the limits of our subjectivist constructions. To quote Schmidt: "The operation called 'construction of realities' thus takes place in individual cognitive systems according to the sociocultural orientations which regulate, reproduce, and evaluate communication and interaction" (see his article in this volume). By linking the neurobiological foundation with cultural and communicative faculties, Schmidt overcomes the isolationist tendency of "Radical Constructivism" and finds a common platform with other scholars who emphasize that we come to know "reality" not as an objective phenomenon but via interpretive activities. As socialized members of societies we share experiences and semiotic practices and in communication we create consensual domains which cannot be reduced to a presupposed reality as objective testing ground.

Schmidt attributes self-referentiality to the cognitive apparatus of the subject but not to communication as a social system. This, however, is precisely what Niklas Luhmann does and at this point Schmidt's critical discussion of Luhmann's systems theory begins. Schmidt conceives of the social system literature as a complex, multidimensional entity. This is an important aspect that separates Schmidt from Luhmann, who is exclusively interested in communication and who refuses admittance of any element that could threaten the homogeneity of the communication system. One of the elements not admitted by Luhmann is the role of social actors. By taking into account production, mediation, reception, and post-processing of literary phenomena — four action dimensions which are further differentiated into action roles — Schmidt, however, allows actors to enter the literary system. The complexity of this system and the interaction between the system and various subsystems prevent Schmidt to define its boundaries by means of dichotomic codes of communication. At this point the empirical study of literature comes in. Whereas for Luhmann the problem of the system's boundaries is a purely definitional one, for Schmidt it is an empirical question:

Apparently not all the processes in literary systems are self-organizing: in a multi-level system with intersections between its component systems and with continuous interaction with other (multi-level) social systems, autonomy, and self-organization seem to be a matter of degree and not, as Luhmann claims, an all-or-none decision. (Schmidt in this volume)

Recently, Schmidt tried to combine systems theory and action theory by elaborating a social theory, the four basic elements of which are cognition, communication, culture, and media (1996). How the structural coupling of these elements can be conceptualized will be an important issue in his future work.

Schmidt's response to Luhmann is a critical one, as I tried to explain. The points of disagreement — heterogeneous elements as constituents of the literary

system, the combination of systems theory and action theory, and the boundaries of the system conceived of as an empirical problem — are far from peripheral ones. Henk de Berg and Matthias Prangel, on the contrary, are loyal supporters of Luhmann's conceptions. This phenomenon does not at all surprise Schmidt. His explanation runs as follows: "Luhmann's decision to accept only communications as components of literary systems, seems to be very attractive to literary scholars because it justifies again the concentration of their efforts on texts and hermeneutics" (Schmidt in this volume).

In the volume *Differenzen. Systemtheorie zwischen Dekonstruktion und Konstruktivismus*, Schmidt on the one hand and de Berg and Prangel on the other criticize each other's attitude with respect to the concept of communication.

In his critical reaction to Schmidt, Berg defends Luhmann's concept of communication as a self-referential system by emphasizing its innovative dimension. According to de Berg, this dimension is guaranteed by Luhmann's conceptualizing systems as processes and by incorporating contingency into his theory: "By not viewing society in terms of acting subjects but in terms of contingent communications Luhmann as it were excommunicates the individual from social systems" (de Berg in this volume). I draw your attention to the ironic semantic effect of "ex-communicate." In my reading de Berg's concluding phrasing sounds not less ironically: "In this way, individuals are granted more freedom, especially the freedom to act immorally or irrationally."

De Berg agrees with Luhmann with respect to the system-specific binary codes. He believes that societal problems are more radically envisaged by Luhmann than by other theorists. The fact that the binary codes in Luhmann's conception are not easily accepted derives — in de Berg's view — from the operational closure of the various systems and from the lack of interest and expertise of scholars for other systems than those they are specialized in. The most innovative aspect of Luhmann's systems theory, however, is "the shift from linguistic reference to communicative difference." Communication is a negation-driven process: "Semantic identity only exists in the form of communicatively produced differences" (de Berg in this volume).

When it comes to clarifying his systems-theoretical position within the domain of literary studies, de Berg elaborates that it is different from the autonomistic, the intentional, and the reader-oriented approach. With respect to the latter he emphasizes that not the historical distance of "*Wirkungsgeschichte*" is at stake, but the heterochronicity of one and the same historical context.

There is one point in the criticism of Schmidt, however, de Berg is ready to accept. The abstract character of Luhmann's concepts are extremely far away from operationalization and application. I wish to add that the examples of application until now are not the most convincing ones. The systems-theoretical approach of the Leiden/Sheffield group, it is true, is not easily compatible with the empirical study of literature.

Matthias Prangel's contribution is closely connected with that of Henk de Berg in the sense that it takes up the criticism of reception studies or *Wirkungsgeschichte*. He denies the existence of "history as a continuous process," which, according to Prangel, is the idea behind *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Instead of one broad organic stream of tradition Prangel proposes to conceptualize tradition as a very "heterogeneous succession of connected communications, many of which quite often simply break off" (Prangel in this volume).

Another important point he deals with is the subject-independent meaning of text-events, a problem strongly related to de Berg's semantic identity as a result of communicatively produced differences. Prangel defends the idea that a text must have a starting point from which it departs and a stable place in the communication it emerges from.

To conclude: the foundational and lucid, but at the same time confrontational contributions of Siegfried J. Schmidt, Henk de Berg, and Matthias Prangel give a good idea of Luhmann's systems theory from the perspective of literary and cultural research. Through the critical exchange between these contributors we can assess the fruitfulness and the range of the progressive and sophisticated theorizing in the domain of social and cultural sciences which we largely owe to Luhmann.

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Works Cited

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A Systems-Oriented Approach to Literary Studies

I.

In the last decades, literary studies have undergone a series of changes, some of them minor, others quite dramatic or even paradigmatic. For the sceptical observer, however, the question remains: Has there really been a substantial change in literary studies, or has the traditional divide between the hermeneutic mainstream and certain secessionists only been perpetuated? Have new approaches such as reception aesthetics, polysystems theory, empirical studies of literature, constructivism or deconstructivism, really altered literary scholars' views of the subjects, problems, methods, and goals of their discipline?

Despite all scepticism, my answer to this question is — yes. In 1996, I would claim, no literary scholar who wants to be taken seriously by the academic world will deny

- that it is inadequate to study literary texts in isolation from their contexts (i.e., actors, culture, society); instead, a scientific (re-)construction of literary phenomena in the broadest sense has to model a network of interacting items, i.e., a system;
- that meaning cannot be regarded as an ontological property of literary texts, and that it arises through some kind of interaction between text and reader in sociocultural contexts;
- that concepts of literature emerge from complicated sociocultural processes of canonization, socialization, and ideological orientation;
- that literary scholarship, like any other academic discipline, is practised by actors in a social system according to rules and norms, goals and interests, which scholars should be able to specify explicitly on demand;
- that in periods of shrinking budgets the so-called humanities usually suffer the worst reductions and that we, therefore, need good reasons to keep literary studies institutionally alive.

In quiet as well as in stormy periods, literary scholars have tried hard to make their discipline "shine" by importing attractive intellectual "equipment" from prospering adjacent disciplines. In many cases, such imports have been evaluated