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**'SYSTEM' AND 'OBSERVER': TWO KEY CONCEPTS
IN (FUTURE) LITERARY STUDIES**

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'System' and 'Observer': Two Key Concepts in (Future) Literary Studies*

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Summary

General systems theory (since L. von Bertalanffy) has offered various options how to conceptualise systems. Opposing N. Luhmann's narrow conception of system I propose to combine systems- and actor-theoretical approaches in order to model social systems (including literature) as non-linearly interrelated complexes of systems where causal structures depend - among others - upon the decision of goal-oriented subsystems, viz. actors whose sociality is introduced into the system via culture. The second part of this paper is devoted to some consequences arriving from the observer problem; e.g. the mutual construction of system and environment, the relation observer: meaning *vis à vis* the operational closure of cognitive systems, and a constructivist reading of the concept 'empirical'.

Zusammenfassung

Die einseitige Konzentration systemtheoretisch interessierter Literaturwissenschaftler auf N. Luhmanns (engen) sozialphilosophischen Systembegriff hat theoretische Möglichkeiten der Allgemeinen Systemtheorie in den Hintergrund gedrängt, obwohl gerade sie nutzbar gemacht werden können für eine Verbindung von Handlungs- und Systemtheorie. Im ersten Teil des Beitrags wird skizziert, wie ein Systemkonzept für eine empirisch orientierte Literaturwissenschaft aussehen könnte. Im zweiten Teil werden dann einige Konsequenzen diskutiert, die sich ergeben, wenn man das Beobachterproblem in der Literaturwissenschaft ernst nimmt. Dabei stehen drei Probleme im Vordergrund: die gegenseitige Konstitution von System und Umwelt; die Beziehung Bedeutung: Beobachter; und eine konstruktivistische Fassung des Empiriebegriffs.

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1.

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 of literary studies, or has the traditional divide between the hermeneutical mainstream and certain secessionists only been perpetuated? Have new approaches, like 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 1994, 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 ontologic property of literary texts, 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 canonisation, socialisation, 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 in terms of a rhetoric of progress, modernisation, or superiority with regard to the problem-solving capacities of rivalling approaches. Yet, in most cases only a new terminology was adopted, in defiance of the old philosophical insight that - strictly speaking - the application of a (relevant) concept means (or at least implies) adopting a whole theory together with the sociocultural context of its genesis and acceptance.

With these introductory remarks I have manoeuvred myself into an uncomfortable position because I will now have to show why and how my proposal to introduce two (more or less) new concepts, 'system' and 'observer', into our scholarly discourse, is more than an intellectual fashion. I have to argue how my candidates fit into (or even improve) the consensual points mentioned above, and how the conceptual machinery contextualising these two concepts actually works - at least in principle.

2.

In section 1 I have claimed a consensus regarding the insight that it is inadequate to study literary texts in isolation from actors and sociocultural contexts. This consensus is implicitly related to the concepts 'system' and 'observer':

- the requirement to see texts in contexts remains (wise but) empty until it is specified which (parts of) contexts matter and which relations between the two can be established. The concept 'system' seems to be a useful tool to organise the relevant sections from the infinity of contextual "bits & pieces" - a promise which has to be checked carefully;
- the experience that studying texts in isolation is no longer acceptable hereby confirms the apparent truism that any kind of textual analysis presupposes an observing system with communicative capacities, operating in an empirical sociocultural situation.

As usual, it is not the general ideas or assumptions that cause the great problems but their concretisation in detail. Let us examine 'system' first.

3.

In the last few years, many literary scholars have developed (more or less explicitly) variants of the notion 'literary system'. Most of these attempts explicitly refer to sociological systems theory, especially to Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. Other attempts borrow their systems-theoretical equipment from general systems theory, invent their own notions of 'system', or try to blend systems- and actor-theoretical approaches (like myself).

As far as I can see, Luhmann's influence on literary systems theory has been most impressive in the last five years (from Australia to Zaire), so let's have a look at it first.

Three of Luhmann's most popular theses read as follows:

No. 1: Social systems emerge from communications, consist exclusively of communications, and reproduce and maintain themselves autopoietically in terms of communications.

Thesis no. 2 says: Communication is the threefold selection of message, information, and understanding.

And thesis no. 3 follows from theses 1 and 2: Individuals (actors, subjects) form neither part of communication nor of social systems but belong to the environment of social systems (and thus of communication).

A great deal of sophisticated criticism has been issued against these theses in recent publications. What matters here, however, is the evaluation of some of the consequences following from Luhmann's theses.

First of all, communication is (theoretically) made an actor. In Luhmann's terminology, communication "observes" itself, it "selects" further communications by virtue of their connectability, it "reproduces" itself through autopoiesis, etc.

Luhmann's *dictum* that communication refers to communication, is not easy to understand. Let me consider two possible readings: Either this dictum reformulates what has long been known as "intertextuality" in literary studies. Or it repeats Husserl's and Schütz's idea that in communicating we can never start from scratch, since we already exist and communicate in a culturally interpreted reality (in "a world of meaning").

Both readings, as far as I can see, do not at all exclude actors as long as we regard both aspects of modern sociological reasoning: viz. the microsociology of actors (with their interests and strategies) in the framework of socialising collective knowledge; and the macrosociology of socio-structural conditions and regulations in the framework of culture.

Various attempts have been undertaken to combine systems theory and action theory (for example by J.S. Coleman 1990, P.M. Hejl 1987, 1989, U. Schimank 1985, 1988, J. Weyer 1993, H. Esser 1989, 1994). My personal impression is that such a combined theoretical framework allows for better empirical research than Luhmann's very abstract and restricted version of systems theory.

On the other hand, 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.

I fully agree with some Luhmannians (for example G. Jäger 1994) that the recent trend in the humanities to identify systems theory with Luhmann's (very idiosyncratic) version is problematic because it reduces the fruitful application of the conceptual apparatus provided by general systems theory (see for example the surveys by G. Ropohl 1978 or G. Schlosser 1993). Let me elaborate on this remark somewhat further.

The various system theories developed in different disciplines from biology to mathematics contain divergent definitions and typologies of 'system'.

Whatever concept of system we adopt or develop ourselves, however, we should keep in mind that we act and interact as empirically conditioned observing systems. From this assumption follows:

- (a) Like all other concepts, concepts of 'system' are observer-dependent cognitive and communicative instruments. They are standards which people invent for specific purposes in specific sociocultural situations, especially for the purpose of drawing distinctions in their experiential reality.

- (b) The meaning of a description of X as α depends upon the problem-solving function the description is supposed to serve. No description is a means in itself. Instead, its function is determined by its position and role in a conceptual framework.
- (c) If, as in the case of Luhmann's *chef-d'oeuvre* (*Soziale Systeme*, ²1985, chapt. 1), a systems theory starts by apodictically stating that "systems exist" and that social systems "are autopoietic systems", the consequences of this claim are complex and far-reaching because - without good reason - Luhmann intermingles the problems of the emergence and of the boundaries of social systems. Luhmann's decision, for example, to postulate that social systems are existing autopoietic systems is reasonable only on the basis of the further claim that the components of social systems are communications and nothing else, which create and preserve themselves and at the same time let sociality emerge autocatalytically. It is this apodictic decision which forces Luhmann, without good reasons, to relegate cognition, actors, nature etc. to the non-social environment, thus blurring the social "nature" of cognition, of actors, and of nature itself.

I therefore reject the apodictic claim by Luhmann and his followers that the social system literature *must* be modelled in terms of communicative systems, i.e. in terms of systems that contain only one homogeneous class of elements. Instead, I agree with B. Meyer (1993) that it is a more promising problem-solving strategy to use a concept of system in a sociology of literature which contains *several interrelated dimensions* (or subsystems). General systems theory does in no way contradict such a solution. Social systems are theoretically modelled as non-linear interrelated dynamic complexes of systems where causal structures depend - among others - upon the decisions of goal-oriented subsystems, viz. human beings or actors.

Thus we return to the problem of combining systems and action theory into a complex social theory. Of course, I cannot argue in detail how this combination can be achieved but a few hints may indicate the basic idea.

The concept of 'actor' I advocate integrates the reflexivity and recursivity of social actions as well as the strategic orientation towards a context constituted by other actors. Actors act according to generalised interests which are embodied in the logic of action of social (sub-)systems and in the social mechanisms supporting the maintenance of social organisations. In other words: the social acting of individuals is always "imbued" by social relations, orientations, and restrictions. U. Schimank (1988) has argued that social systems are not acting themselves (as Luhmann says) but that they shape actions by way of patterns of reducing complexity.

J. Weyer (1993) has emphasised that social structures do not - as Luhmann claims - emerge autocatalytically; instead, their emergence presupposes and includes the interests of actors. The

social activities of actors are influenced by three conflicting rationalities: the rationality of the system (which attributes a specific meaning to social actions via systemic connectabilities); the rationality of communication (defining the role of communications in social processes); and the rationality of the actor. The interaction between these rationalities is fundamental for the construction of social reality (in the sense of Berger and Luckmann). The compulsory character of the social results from the different speeds with which these three rationalities change in history.

The introduction of actors into systems theory can perhaps best be achieved by including a theory of *elites* (cf. A. Sterbling 1991). Elites are theoretically modelled as individuals or (more or less organised) groups which cooperate or conflict with each other in relation to the systemically determined acting goals and possibilities. Elites are defined as those instances which play a decisive role in the social construction of reality, in defining specific situations, and in making relevant decisions. Elites introduce, stabilise, and change socially relevant ideas, convictions and orientations as well as those symbolic systems which present the accumulation of subjective and cultural capital (sensu P. Bourdieu) which in turn produces and preserves elites. Due to their privileged action possibilities, actions and decisions, elites influence the opinions of a greater public, orient their activities, and thus change their life situation in a non-trivial way.

4.

I propose to model the social system literature* as a complex unit with several interrelated dimensions.

In terms of general systems theory (cf. G. Schlosser 1993) this complex unit can be specified as a heterogenetic system, i.e. as a cyclically operating dynamic process system which is dependent on a so-called permissive environment that contains no restrictive systems. Heterogenetic systems are constituted by the coupling of relatively autonomous and non-autonomous heterogenetic subsystems. Autonomous subsystems can survive outside the system, too, whereas non-autonomous subsystems cannot.

The complex unit results from the systems-specific organisation (see below) of relevant interactions of the component subsystems, which can be characterised as self-organisation. With regard to the social system literature, I introduce five interrelated structural dimensions:

- actors and their cognitive domains

* Historically, the developments which are theoretically modelled in terms of 'literary system' have happened in the late 18th century (in Germany) in the overall process of the functional differentiation of society. (See Schmidt 1989)

- communication processes
- social structures and institutions (including media systems)
- media offerings (literary texts and other literary phenomena in the broadest sense)
- the symbolic orders of cultural knowledge.

The phenomena of these dimensions can be modelled as subsystems which need not be completely contained within the system but which must contribute to its emergence, functioning, and reproduction in relevant ways - whereby it is an empirical question what 'relevant' means for whom. The interrelations of system and subsystems belong to three levels: to the level of events (simple interaction or symmetry breaking), to the level of processes, and to the level of relatively stable elements (structures and efficient factors). Subsystems need not be contained in only one social system. Instead, they may form part of several systems to the degree of their relevant contribution to the respective systems (for example actors acting in several roles in different social systems).

In "modern" societies, the acting possibilities of actors in the social system literature are institutionally distributed onto four action dimensions: production, mediation, reception, and post-processing of literary phenomena; these action dimensions are further differentiated into action roles according to the developmental state of a specific society. (See, for example, the quite elaborated system of action roles in mass media systems.)

All activities in the literary system are oriented towards, and interpreted in the light of, collective (i.e. mutually expected) cultural knowledge (including values, norms, and emotions) acquired by each actor in the process of literary socialisation.

Actors may generally be divided into two sets: professional and non-professional actors, who may both be members of elites.

The most prominent *media events* (from print to audio-visuality) in literary systems are of course those deemed literary by relevant groups of actors (i.e. not only by experts and elites!).

I wonder whether or not it is useful to model the set of relevant literary media events as a system, too. Perhaps this might have been useful with regard to a social system in which printed texts prevailed. In modern literary systems, however, texts form but one part of the (fuzzy) set of literary items, and other media events continuously gain ground (Schmidt 1992). Since the selection of literary items in social processes is no longer determined by normative poetic principles but results from communication processes and is influenced by socially diversified socialisations, it is more plausible, in my view, to model literary phenomena as (a) fuzzy set(s) with changing components and variable hierarchies resulting from complicated processes of canonisation (including de-, peri- and re-canonisations).

As mentioned above, literariness is defined in literary communication; and to the degree literary communication is differentiated, concepts of literariness and literary values differ according to

sociocultural differentiations which have gradually transformed the literary system into a system of value-subsystems. Despite all efforts, neither church nor state, neither economy nor any other instance is able to define literariness and to determine literary evaluation. Literary communication has become self-regulating, autarkic, or autonomous. But what does that mean "in practice"?

It seems reasonable to assume that a good deal of the processes (especially communications) in social systems which are not continuously regulated by other systems (i.e. from "outside"), organise themselves. It will be a matter of empirical inspection to see how and to what degree(s) this actually happens. Apparently not all the processes in literary systems are self-organising: in a multi-level system with intersections between its component systems and with continuous interaction with other (multi-level) social systems autonomy and self-organisation seem to be a matter of degree and not, as Luhmann claims, an all-or-none decision. (Remember that even strictly autonomous systems can be causally influenced if their mechanisms are simulated!)

If self-organisation is defined as the spontaneous production of order "inside" a system according to systems-specific values and procedures (cf. for example G. Roth's (1986) and P.M. Hejl's (1989) respective proposals, and H. von Foerster's concept of eigenvalues), then it is reasonable to assume that modern literary systems are self-organising *insofar* as all decisions concerning literariness and literary values are made "inside" the social system literature, i.e. in literary communications. On the other hand, economic or technical influences on the literary system are much less easily transformed into systems-specific operations.

Regarding the complexity of the "architecture" of literary systems and the astounding range of possible interactions between the system and its components (subsystems) the definition of a system's boundary by means of dichotomic codes of communication seems to be much too superficial. Instead, the boundary problem turns out to be a problem of inclusion: To what degree do items (in the broadest sense) in the five structural dimensions of a literary system (see above) empirically contribute to the production, mediation, reception, and post processing of literary phenomena? (Cf. for example G. Rusch 1991, 1993.)

According to the concept of system we choose for our theory, there are several possibilities to define the boundaries of a system.

In Luhmann's theory a social system contains only homogeneous components in one and the same structural dimension: viz. communications. In his case, the boundary is defined by a principle of exclusion which forbids to take into account events other than communications (for example actions, actors, institutions, interests etc.). A binary code definitely determines all the relevant components of a social system.

My proposal models systems as coupled "wholes" of several (active) subsystems with rather different boundary mechanisms, and with various domains of intersection between subsystems in the structural dimensions as well as between subsystems and system.

Whereas in Luhmann's model the definition of a system's boundary is a purely definitional problem, it is in any case an empirical one. Luhmann (and his followers) are still searching for the "correct" binary code. My problem is how to analyse the interaction between the inhomogeneous subsystems such that those relations of exchange, causation, selection, and exclusion become observable which form part of the empirical literary system. Consequently, my definition of the boundary of literary systems by means of macro-conventions (see Schmidt 1982) has to be revised. I still hold the view that conventions, as elements of the collective knowledge of actors in social systems, are important links between actor- and system-oriented views at literary systems. But empirical projects have provided evidence that the two conventions I have proposed 15 years ago do not cover the whole range of operations in literary systems and that they have to be respecified according to the differentiation of the literary system into subsystems.

The difference between Luhmann's proposal and mine can be seen in that Luhmann exclusively regards communications whereas I am interested in the mutual constitutive interdependence of social actors, social structures, communications, collective knowledge, and media. I am convinced that we must take into account the full complexity of this network in order to explain how cognition and communication - though at present modelled in terms of strictly separated systems - can cooperate at all. In my view, this problem (known as "interpenetration" or "structural coupling") can only be solved by introducing media systems as instruments of coupling *and* by respecting sociocultural acting conditions in cognition as well as cognitive acting conditions in communication (cf. Schmidt 1994). This proposal implies, of course, that communication is modelled in terms of actions and social action conditions. Luhmann's apodictic thesis that communication *cannot* be conceived of as action and that communicative processes *are not* chains of actions is rejected in many sociological positions - in the meantime even within Luhmann's school.

As far as I can see, the three basic questions (or riddles?) of sociology

- how social structures result from the interaction of individuals,
- how individual actions are determined by social structures, and
- how social changes come about,

can be answered in a systems-theoretical as well as in an actor-theoretical context. Coleman, Esser, Hejl, Weyer and others (see above) have demonstrated that actors can be chosen as the basic components of social systems *insofar* as they act on the basis and with regard to collective knowledge, expected expectations, and internalised interpretations of sociocultural deter-

minants of action. (Remember that Max Weber once defined "soziales Handeln" as "ein sinnhaft am Verhalten des anderen orientiertes eignes Verhalten"!)

5.

In section 2 I had promised to check whether or not a systems-theoretical approach can specify the selection of relevant contextual items and relate them reasonably to literary phenomena.

I hope it has become clear that a systemic approach to literature at least contributes to an answer by specifying the structural domains where relevant contextual features may be looked for. It is indispensable, for example, to know the discourse system of a society in order to characterise the specificity of its respective literary discourse. We have to be familiar with the status of professionalisation and institutionalisation of the action roles in a literary system in order to evaluate the selection of topics, genres, or aesthetic strategies by an author. We must know a lot about contemporary discourses about legal, psychological, or political issues in order to come to a proper analysis of literary discourses on comparable subjects, etc.

Of course, a systemic approach neither selects all the pertinent items automatically, nor does it specify all text-context-relations for all cases. I think this is no shortcoming. It depends on the kind of problem to be solved and the generality or specificity of a solution how detailed the selection of contextual items has to be and what kinds of theories we have to develop or to apply in order to relate textual and contextual items to one another.

To cut a long and complicated story short: The problem of dealing with contexts is a context-sensitive problem, too. -

I am fully aware that this (very general and sketchy) proposal for a systems-theoretical orientation of literary studies is less elegant and streamlined than Luhmann's. Yet: since it is less reductionist and abstractive it appears to be more promising with regard to my main purpose, viz. an empirical study of literature, including, *of course*, the study of literary texts and other literary phenomena. My emphasis on this point seems necessary since some scholars still claim that the empirical study of literature is not at all interested in literary phenomena or even excludes them from its subject domain. My argument against this thesis focusses on the second key concept of (future) literary studies: the *observer* (= observing system).

6.

In a certain respect the history of "modern" epistemology might be (re-)written as the story of the *observer*. This story deals with the consequences of the insight that whatever is said is said by an observer to another observer. Kant, Nietzsche, Vaihinger, Simmel, Cassirer, Fleck, and

many others have contributed their special chapters to the observer-story whose main narrators in the last two decades have become the so-called (radical or systems-theoretical) constructivists. The main question in this discourse is: How do observing systems operate, and what follows from the shift of interest from the "what" to the "how" of knowledge?

Whereas in the first period of constructivism (neuro-) biological topics dominated the discourse, concentrated on concepts such as neuronal networks, self-organisation, self-reference, autopoiesis, operational closure, autonomy, etc., the interest in sociocultural and media aspects of cognition and communication has recently come to the fore (see S.J. Schmidt 1994). Of course, I cannot go into the details here; nevertheless I shall try to outline some essentials of the observer story for studying literature (in terms of literary systems).

7.

Let us start our considerations with a difference which in a Batesonian sense makes a difference, i.e. the difference between system and environment. The system in question is a cognitive system (brain and body). 'System' and 'environment' can only be defined in relation to one another. That is to say: The respective environment of cognitive systems is the result of their sense-constructing activities, and not a spatial section of "the reality". Reality, one might say, is no place (no *perì échon*), it is the result of operations. On the other hand, the environment is no "empty instance" but relativises the internal self-reference and operational closure of the cognitive system.

Cognitive systems are not passive onlookers on reality but active participants in the social construction of realities. As participants, their cognitive constructions, however, are not at all arbitrary. Instead, they are empirically conditioned by biological, psychological, sociocultural and media instances, and structurally perpetuated. As members of the human species, living systems have organs which in the course of evolution have become capable instruments of constituting viable environments. As socialised members of societies and cultures, cognitive systems acquire experiences in consensual domains with other living systems. These consensual domains constitute, and are in turn maintained by, language and collective knowledge in the symbolic orders of a culture which constitutes, and is in turn maintained by, communication. 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. These constructions are determined by the conditions of the environment, by acting conditions, and by sociocultural limits and capacities of sense production. L. Fleck, J. Piaget, J. von Uexküll, C.F. von Weizsäcker, H. von Foerster, and many other scholars have produced a good many reasons for why objects as specific objects are constituted by

subjects. Thinking does not provide us with a picture of reality but with a picture of our activities in environments, that is to say of what we are doing with "reality". Things are things-for-us, "Tat-Sachen", i.e. they are the results of highly conditioned operations. These operations are "real": they need operators and time for performing, and yield results. Metaphysically speaking: our cognitive operations do not just add form to material, but material forms itself by differentiating itself into system and environment. The traditional empiristic questions of whether "the world" or "human reason" (Vernunft) is the relevant arbiter in all questions with truth-relevance has to be answered thus: it is neither the world nor reason, it is collective knowledge which decides these cases. As in visual perception, where we cannot evade the blind spot of seeing, our social construction of meaningful environments is dominated by the blind spots of our cultural distinctions. Cultures, i.e. semantico-epistemological communities, serve as (more or less unquestioned) pools of distinctions together with their normative and emotional interpretations. As long as a society, based on culture and reproducing itself via culture, survives, constructor and construct form a unity (or even an identity). In order to fix these arguments terminologically, I propose (together with H. Feilke 1994) to replace the traditional epistemological concept of 'reality' by '*oikos*', i.e. the culturally constructed environment we live in.

Signs do, therefore, not refer to objects in reality but to interpreted activities in culture, i.e. to communication. This is the main reason why autonomous cognitive systems are able to interact on the social level of communication although cognition and communication belong to separated domains. If human beings in a specific society operate under comparable biological as well as sociocultural conditions, it seems plausible that their results are (to various degrees) comparable to each other although cognitive systems are operationally closed. By 'operational closure' I mean that symmetry breaking happens exclusively in the individuals' cognitive systems.

8.

Despite all divergences in detail, it has become a widely shared assumption in semiotics that the meanings of media offerings (in the broadest sense) are not ontological entities residing in the media offerings themselves but that they result from socioculturally oriented cognitive operations with media offerings in contexts. Concepts and metaphors like "text-reader-interaction", "top-down, bottom-up" or "meaning attribution" point into this direction.

In the light of my former argumentation the most general assumption in this semiotic discourse may be formulated again in terms of a basic difference: meaning vs (semantically operative) system, or: meaning vs observer, whereby this difference entails the same epistemological idea

as the distinction system vs environment. The empirical conditions for producing meaning can be described in terms of collective knowledge which has to be (re-)produced and applied to the processing of communicative instruments (for example natural language) in specific contexts. Since this (re-)production and application varies (more or less drastically) from system to system and from context to context in the course of biographical and sociocultural developments, we have to assume that the meanings constructed by semantically operative systems, for example, with regard to verbal texts, necessarily differ from one another. In a series of empirical experiments, D. Meutsch and I (1986) have been able to demonstrate that these differences are marginal with regard to trivial informative texts in standardised pragmatic uses (contexts), but remarkable with regard to complex technical or literary texts in undefined reception contexts. The history of the academic interpretation of important literary works backs this assumption and shows that it is due to the cultural homogeneity of the members of a community of interpreters (with comparable blind spots of observation) that specific text-readings or meaning constructs are unanimously accepted for a certain period (St. Fish's story, I guess).

As in the case of the interdependence between system and environment, I want to emphasise again that meanings are, of course, not attributed to texts in an arbitrary way although each cognitive system has to perform this attribution, since the degrees of freedom in this operation are socioculturally determined by the materials, rules, and orders of communication.

The question whether the text or the cognitive system are the arbiters in deciding conflicts has now to be reformulated. The signs of language semiotically "materialise" communicative experiences. They do not refer to non-verbal entities in "the reality" but to our common sense knowledge of possible reference, i.e. signs refer to a social praxis. Perhaps one might say that the meaning of a word is the set of its acceptable uses in communication, i.e. in culture(s). In his brilliant doctoral thesis, H. Feilke has argued that the sociality of language manifests itself primarily in the forms which result from, and in turn orient, linguistic behaviour in a society. Consequently, the discourse on language and communication is well advised to look for descriptions which sufficiently respect modes and degrees of self-organisation instead of linear causation between text and cognition. In my view, the regulation of meaning production happens in the closed circle (who knows how many loops it has) of operations and orientations between the poles of cognition, media, communication and culture, including structural as well as genetic aspects. Like reality, which emerges as a kind of viable allreference for such circular operating, meaning, too, is not mine or yours, but our culture's in you and me. It results from the empirically conditioned operation of systems; but it is system-dependent and therefore continual changing (- a favourite deconstructivist topic).

9.

I hope it has become obvious that with taking the observer-problem seriously, everything in literary scholarship is bound to lose its "innocence". Nothing remains self-evident, and second-order observation renders everything contingent - of course only in principle, since in practice, operating as first-order observers, we rely on successful experiences in our activities as well as on unquestioned evidences in our argumentations. W. Stegmüller (1954) has convincingly argued that in scientific communication as well unquestioned evidences serve both as points of departure and as final legitimations.

Consequently, when we talk about something, we have to qualify our observational position in order to become explicit and understandable in scholarly communication. This exigency rules out formulations like "the text means" or "the text does". Instead, either we as persons/observers, or the methods whose application generates "data" have to be named as the meaning-producing instances. Of course, this cannot be done consistently for stylistic reasons - but we have to keep this argument in mind.

Talking about contingency and blind spots does not at all imply arbitrariness. As mentioned earlier, actors, communication, and social systems, have their own system rationality. The selection and application of concepts, criteria, values etc. is oriented by, imbedded in, and bearing upon, traditions, experiences and communications, whose offsprings, filiations, and implications can partially be observed by second-order observers with their own blind spots etc. etc. With regard to the observation that, *in principle*, all distinctions we apply might be replaced by others, though *practically* observing (= distinguishing) systems have good reasons to apply the distinctions they do, literary scholars should become more sensitive with respect to the definition, legitimation, and interpretation of the concepts they use, and also with the interrelation of these concepts in conceptual networks related to neighbouring, or even founding other, conceptual networks.

All the key notions of our discipline: from literature, interpretation, history, canon or value to literary scholarship, are extremely conditioned and interrelated; they are nodes in networks which nobody can trace back to their origins (I suppose there aren't any).

I do not (or: no longer) hold the view that a clearcut definition of these key concepts is a decisive presupposition for making our discipline a "science". Nevertheless, we should intensify second-order observation in order to find out what sorts of distinctions are at the base of our conceptual assumptions, and how alternative distinctions might work. An essential characteristic of scientific work has always been the extension of observation as well as of observational self-references (first, second, third order observation). This, I think, should hold true for literary scholarship, too.

10.

In the last section I pointed to one important exigency of *empirical research* (in every discipline): viz. intensive conceptual effort, "die Arbeit am Begriff", as Hegel once put it, in order to know what we are talking about - and why we do it one way or another. Without a thorough clarification of (what counts for us as) our knowledge we are neither able to formulate questions with empirical content nor can we operationalise these questions in order to produce and interpret "data" in the framework of theories and methodologies.

In the past, the concept 'empirical' was always related to 'experience'. (Cf. Schmidt 1994 forthcoming) I agree with this tradition, but only in principle. Today we have good reasons to claim that experience can no longer be (in an empiristic manner) restricted to sensory perception alone. In addition, we have to keep in mind that 'reality' or 'environment' are defined in relation to observing systems and vice versa. Experience, in my sense, integrates sensory/perceptual, motoric, and conceptual elements, it "interweaves" operational as well as "ontological" knowledge. J. Piaget as well as H.R. Maturana or F.J. Varela have continually emphasised that human experience and knowing is effective acting in cultural traditions. Knowledge is action which, as a social event, happens in "linguaging" (to use Maturana's awful neologism).

If - by equally respecting system and environment as mutually defining instances - we define 'oikos' as the domain which is determined by the activities of observing systems (as St. Jensen said: "We can talk about nature only in culture"), or if we follow B.C. van Fraassen's (1980) argument that what counts as an observable phenomenon is a function of the epistemic community (observable = observable-to-us), then the objectivity of experiences has to be determined in terms of making, communicating, and evaluating experiences. The mental representations of our environment must be regarded as mapping or coordinating relations, not as images, as E. Oeser & F. Seitelberger (1988) have clearly formulated. We do not mirror things, but our handling of those things.

I can, therefore, also agree with the logical argumentation of G. Patzig (1980). He states that facts can only be grasped in terms of sentences. A fact is always a fact that ..., in other words, facts are essentially language-dependent. A fact is what a true sentence expresses, that is to say, the fact which a sentence expresses is made up by the truth conditions of this sentence.

If we thus conceptualise 'oikos' in terms of a *linguo-cultural Gestalt(ung)* which can neither be reduced to "the external reality" nor to an intentional subject as its author or creator (as B. Vaassen has put it recently), then we have to admit that the scientific production of knowledge happens primarily on the level of communication in the framework and under the conditions of the social system 'science'. Science may consequently be characterised as the methodical construction of knowledge on the basis of an elaborate network of concepts (which defines one of

the differences between everyday and scientific production of knowledge). From a communicative point of view, scientists and scholars do not "handle" stable realities but communicatively stabilised distinctions and descriptions in the experiential world of a specific society. Objects of perception in this world can be described with H. von Foerster as symbols for eigen-behaviours which become stable if the recursive application of cognitive operations to cognitive operations does no longer produce changes of state.

What can be a reasonable reading of 'empirical research' in this allegedly relativistic framework?

Generally speaking, empirical research in a constructivist framework means the production of logical, pragmatic, and social stabilities. Following P. Kruse (1988), I regard stability to be a central criterion of/for "reality" both on the level of first- and second-order observation. Knowledge is evaluated as "adequate to reality" if it allows relevant predictions and thus provides a stable basis of action.

Whatever successfully supports the construction of stability (according to *ceteris-paribus*-conditions) in (scientific) communication serves as datum or document. H. von Foerster (1993) has described the methodically controlled production of data as trivialisation, i.e. as a procedure to construe stable distinctions under conditions which - in many cases - drastically reduce ecological complexities (for example in laboratory research).

Consequently, the traditional reference of 'empirical' to 'the reality' and to the first-order observer has to be transferred to cognitive activities, to the construction and validity of knowledge, and to the level of second-order observation. If these observations are directed by theories and methods, we talk of scientific empirical research as the results can be stabilised in (inter)disciplinary communication and as concepts, criteria and results of systematical experiencing are consensual in an epistemological community (= socially stable). In this respect I agree with N. Luhmann (1990) that facts can be defined as "externalised communication". In addition, W. Balzer (1985) produced the argument that we have to assume degrees of empiricalness instead of yes-no-decisions.

11.

At the end of this rather sketchy paper readers may ask for the applicability of my considerations to their daily work. I fully accept this question, and I do hope readers will at least partially accept my answer.

In my view, the constant reflection of the many aspects of the key concepts 'system' and 'observer' is necessary (or at least helpful) to construe our subject domain with all due complexity (going from texts to literary systems). This reflection reminds us of the constructivity of all our

cognitive and communicative enterprises. That is to say, the main focus of our interest shifts from objects to processes, from identity to difference, from truth to contingency, from knowing-what to knowing-how.

Many readers may take these considerations to be a plea for relativism and a piece of post-modernist philosophy.

Indeed, I do think that the constructivism I have advocated in this paper is a "post-modernist" approach rather than a "modern" one (in F. Lyotard's or W. Welsch's (1988) reading of these vague concepts). I. Wallerstein remarked that after 1989 we have (politically) arrived "in the true realm of uncertainty", and more and more critics of culture declare pluralism and relativism to be the signatures of our time.

My answer is very short: There will be neither democracy, nor science, nor humanity without pluralism. And relativism seems to be - as St. Seidman has argued - the invention of intellectuals who, at the same time, offer remedies for this disease. In praxis, relativism is a pseudo-problem which cannot - and which need not be solved.

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