

THOMAS KLINKERT: Littérature et théorie des systèmes. Lire avec Luh-**mann** [Literature and systems theory: Reading with Luhmann]

Strasbourg: ÉLiPhi, 2024. 186 pp. ISBN 978-2-37276-072-0

DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.2.15

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Thomas Klinkert, a professor at the University of Zurich and a specialist in French and comparative literature, has long explored the relationship between literature and society. In his recent publication, *Littérature et théorie des systèmes. Lire avec Luhmann* – a collection of his articles originally published in German between 2003 and 2022 and adapted for the French-speaking readership – Klinkert analyzes selected literary texts through the lens of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann and his systems theory, as articulated most notably in *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1997; Eng. trans. *Theory of Society*, 2012–2013).

In social science, systems theory conceptualizes modern society as a constellation of functionally differentiated systems, such as politics, economy, law, science, religion, and art. These systems are characterized by autonomy, maintained through operational closure (meaning that no single system can govern the others), and are distinguished by their own internal binary coding. According to Klinkert, literature, as a subsystem within the broader system of art, represents a rich and promising field for applying Luhmann's theoretical framework. This, naturally, raises the question: What, precisely, is the contribution of systems theory to literary studies? The answer is outlined in the author's preface, where Klinkert suggests that the principal aim of his book is to highlight the social dimension of literary texts, particularly their communicative and semiotic functions. When approached from the perspective of systems

theory, literature offers valuable insights into the general functioning of social systems and reveals the specificity of literary communication within a broader socio-cultural context (2024, VIII). However, literary analysis is not intended to validate a given theory, but rather to demonstrate the theory's utility as a tool for interpretation and knowledge production (8). As such, Klinkert's application of Luhmann's theoretical concepts to the field of literature offers a fresh, in-depth, and even unexpected perspective on selected literary texts drawn from medieval times to the present and from various linguistic traditions – including French, Spanish, and Italian works that may already be familiar to readers.

Klinkert's book is structured into an introduction and three main chapters. The introduction outlines the relevance and applicability of systems theory to literary studies, presenting various approaches to literature that are further developed throughout the book, particularly through discussions of theoretical concepts, functional differentiation, and semantics. The first chapter examines three fundamental concepts of Luhmannian theory: *autopoiesis*, the relationship between medium and form, and second-order observation. The second chapter deals with the implications of the autonomy of social systems, while in the third chapter, the author delves into the semantics of love and the role of narration within literary texts.

One of the key concepts of Luhmann's theory that Klinkert examines is *autopoiesis* –

a term Luhmann adopts from biology, where it was developed in the 1980s by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. *Autopoiesis* refers to the capacity of a system to produce and reproduce the elements necessary for its own functioning, thereby sustaining the operational closure characteristic of each distinct system. In this context, Klinkert poses a central question: What is the place of reality in fiction, given that, on the one hand, literature has traditionally been regarded as mimetic, while on the other, the system is considered operationally closed? As he argues, nothing external can enter a system unless it is first translated into the system's internal code, which is governed by a specific guiding distinction that structures how the system processes information (in the art system, it is a distinction between beautiful/not beautiful). In other words, *autopoiesis* does not evaluate art based on external factors (e.g. politics or economy) but relies on self-reference. Its main characteristics include the variation of structures through self-organization, self-observation, second-order observation, and the recursive networking of operations (15). Although Luhmann maintains that literature emerged as a functionally differentiated system only in the 18th century, autopoietic principles can already be observed in earlier works – for example, in the Arthurian novel at the end of the 12th century with Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au Lyon* (1180; Eng. trans. *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, 1987), and at the birth of the modern novel in the early 16th century with Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615; Eng. trans. *Don Quixote*, 1612, 1620). The latter, which draws upon the Arthurian and chivalric tradition, invites reflection on the perennial relationship between literature and reality, and, by extension, on the epistemic potential of literary fiction. *Don Quixote* can be interpreted not only as a critique of fiction, but also, paradoxically, as its defense – an idea illustrated by the analysis of Don Quixote's idiosyncratic behaviour (41). As Klinkert argues, the novel reveals the theory of *autopoiesis* in practice:

literature is born from literature, and reality is produced through literature (25).

Another Luhmannian concept elaborated more in detail is the distinction between medium and form, which posits that literary communication functions as a form based on the second-order media. As Klinkert explains, “Works of art refer to pre-existing works of art and employ the unity of the difference between medium and form – which constitutes these works as a whole – as their medium” (43; trans. by S. R.). In simpler terms, this referring process corresponds to the phenomenon of intertextuality. Accordingly, Klinkert analyzes Petrarch's canzone “Chiare, fresche et dolci acque (RVF 126)” (“Clear water, fresh and sweet”; the poem is from the collection *Il Canzoniere: Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* (Eng. trans. *The Canzoniere or Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, 2005) from multiple perspectives (pragmatic, lexical, syntagmatic, etc.). However, Luhmann's conceptualization of the form/medium distinction, as applied by Klinkert, may strike readers as overly intricate and not easily accessible.

By contrast, the application of the third concept – second-order observation, a constitutive element of *autopoiesis* across various systems – proves particularly fruitful when applied to literature. Second-order observation enables one to observe acts of first-order observation, thereby making visible what is typically hidden. This concept is illustrated through Klinkert's detailed analysis of works by Luigi Pirandello *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921; Eng. trans. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1922), Nathalie Sarraute *Portrait d'un inconnu* (1948; Eng. trans. *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, 1958), and Anne Serre *Notre si chère vieille dame* (Our dearly beloved old lady, 2022), which highlights two key aspects: first, the authors' reflexive awareness of second-order observation; and second, the avant-garde character of these texts, in which the reader witnesses the process of representing representation (the production of mimesis) rather than a conventional narrative. In other words,

second-order observation reveals the mechanisms of literary creation, whether through dramatized or narrative mediation.

The second chapter focuses on the concept of autonomy in systems theory, emphasizing that, on the one hand, systems operate according to their own internal coding, and on the other, no system can control or direct the functioning of another (83). Klinkert explores the implications of this autonomy by means of semantics (meaning auto-reflection and auto-description) adapted to individual subjectivity (85), as well as through the questions of morality and aesthetics. The first dimension is exemplified in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782; Eng. trans. *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, 1796), which illustrates several aspects of literary autonomy, including textual self-referentiality, a departure from mimetic representation, reflections on truth and falsehood, a sense of detachment or solitude. The second dimension is explored through Klinkert's analysis of Gabriele d'Annunzio's novel, *L'Innocente* (1892; Eng. trans. *The Intruder*, 1897) and André Gide's novel *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914; Eng. trans. *The Vatican Cellars*, 1969), framed by philosophical references to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887; Eng. trans. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, 1967) and Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790; Eng. trans. *The Critique of Judgement*, 1892).

In this chapter, Klinkert also revisits the distinction between knowledge and literature, referencing key thinkers and authors from the literary tradition. Normally, literature is not considered a source of knowledge, as its primary function is not epistemic. However, for Luhmann, knowledge is understood as a purely communicative phenomenon (127). As Klinkert explains, Luhmann distinguishes between knowledge as a fundamental component of communication and knowledge produced within scientific discourse (124). Within this framework, Luhmann also addresses the question of fictional discourse, which renders it impossible to

clearly distinguish between truth statements, elements of knowledge and fictional invention. Paradoxically, it is precisely indiscernibility that enables literary fiction to contribute to the production of knowledge (129).

The third chapter explores the relationship between literature and society. Klinkert draws on the concept of semantics, which, in Luhmann's sense, refers to a domain of communication through which society reflects on itself by describing its own structure and evolution (134). On one hand, Klinkert applies the notion of love to the context of Romanticism, which he sees as a moment of "recognition and exposure of the transformation in the semantics of love" (135). Through a comparative analysis of the romantic relationships in Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816; Eng. trans. *Adolphe*, 1816) and Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927; Eng. trans. *In Search of Lost Time*, 1922–1931), the author reveals a critical perspective on the ideal of romantic love. On the other side, in his reading of Elio Vittorini's novel *Le donne di Messina* (1949; Eng. trans. *Women of Messina*, 1973), which portrays the tension between a vision of social utopia and narrative self-referentiality, Klinkert once again addresses the question of mimetic representation. He investigates the conflict between the author's ethical and moral stance and literary experimentation – highlighting the inherent tensions that arise when distinct systems (ethics and literature) interact.

Thomas Klinkert's publication offers a range of thought-provoking reflections on enduring questions about the nature of literature, approached from a sociological perspective yet grounded in close textual analysis. Throughout the book, Klinkert demonstrates a strong command of Luhmann's theoretical framework, to which he refers frequently. The repetition of key concepts from systems theory – stemming in part from the book's original form as a collection of separate articles – should not be viewed as a drawback; rather, it reinforces the reader's understanding of complex ideas. Although

Luhmann's theory can at times appear demanding, Klinkert's thoughtful mediation and application of its principles to literary texts reveal the potential of systems theory as an effective methodological approach. Ultimately, the book's major contribution lies in its ability to enrich our understanding of specific literary works and the historical contexts in which they emerged. It will therefore be of particular interest to specialists in comparative and Romance literatures, scholars of

epistemocriticism, as well as literary historians and theoreticians.

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This work was supported by the
Slovak Research and Development Agency
under contract No. APVV-20-0179.