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Did Early German Romanticism Impact Systems Theory? (Abstract)

- Full-length article in: *JLT* 9/2 (2015), 271–292.

The writings of Niklas Luhmann, the towering architect of modern systems theory, abound with references to the literature of early German Romanticism. Starting from this observation, the article investigates the relevance of certain Romantic ideas for the formation of Luhmann's theory. Transcending categories of influence and commentary, it argues that literature does not anticipate theory in this case, nor does theory flesh out blind spots in literary texts. Rather, it suggests that systems theory repeatedly turns to Romanticism in order to perfect its tools and sharpen its concepts, increasing in complexity with each encounter. It is precisely this potential for interruption and growth that Luhmann sees and values in the early Romantics and that makes them privileged partners in his ongoing attempt to add new pillars to the grand edifice of his social theory.

To be sure, the task of reconsidering the relations between systems theory and early Romanticism could take different routes and the article outlines some of these in a roadmap for alternative inquiries. A second aside, included in the article, addresses a potentially misleading case of homonymy – the notion of system. When the Romantics speak of ›system‹, often with some degree of reservation, they engage critically as well as poetically with the philosophy of German Idealism. Luhmann, by contrast, finds his models elsewhere and thus tends to circumvent this particular tradition.

Nonetheless, in the ongoing endeavor of theory building, Romanticism seems to offer just the right kind of balance between affinity and resistance to systems theory to qualify as (what Luhmann considers the highest form of compliment) an irritation. Without a strong dose of Romanticism, one might say, systems theory would neither ›see‹ the world by way of observation, nor recognize the resilience of communication (even in the face of incomprehensibility), nor fully acknowledge the systemic processes of creating autonomy by way of autopoiesis.

With Romanticism, Luhmann claims, art begins to reflect on its autonomy. Now fully liberated from serving religious purposes or teaching moral lessons, art commences anew. It becomes markedly and decidedly self-reflexive. Though it shares this feature with all functional systems, there is something special in the self-reflexivity, which constitutes the autonomy of art – the rejection of all determinations coming from the outside. Modern art presents nothing but art and it draws radical attention to this fact. Romantic irony, doublings, and a penchant for negotiating writing as the medium of literature, all perform this feat. Through such devices, Romanticism playfully showcases the autonomy of art and, by extension, the autopoiesis of art as social system. Looking at the way Romanticism treats and establishes autonomy deepens the theoretical insights into the workings of autopoiesis.

Luhmann also credits Romanticism with exploring the boundaries of communication. He reads Romantic texts as staging prolonged experiments with self-sabotaging communications, be they reduplication, indeterminacy, oscillation, or incommunicability. While testing the limits of communication, Romanticism cannot help but demonstrate how unshakably robust the concept is – for communication can indeed communicate all of the above and still not fall apart. Since

even outlandish communication fails to bring about its own end, the Romantics serve as a test case for a larger point Luhmann likes making: communication is the foundation of all social systems and as such, always continues, no matter what. Having been vetted in this way, his theory stands, as Luhmann notes with much delight.

What Literary Studies consider as fiction, systems theory describes as a particular model of observation. Romanticism with its fairy tale universes, dream-like parallel spheres, unlikely encounters and split characters, offers contingent, ever-changing and always advancing observations. It thus brings to light that which is otherwise confined to the background – the world as it appears and as it potentially could be. In so doing, Romanticism makes the world, however fleetingly, noticeable for both the occasional reader as well as the astute theorist.

Conversely, to Luhmann's infatuation, the Romantics seem to have found in him exactly the kind of reader they always dreamed of – someone who transitions effortlessly from reader to critic, and who renews the textual tradition upon which he draws, unlocking the potential of texts as he endows them with new and unexpected meanings, while also deepening his own critical insights through the challenges they pose. Luhmann himself might either have been conscious of this connection or appalled by the suggestion, but in the intellectual encounters he sought and created throughout his works, the foremost theorist of social systems lets himself be profoundly irritated by the writers of early German Romanticism.

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2015-09-28

JLTONline ISSN 1862-8990

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How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Patrick Fortmann, Did Early German Romanticism Impact Systems Theory?.

In: JLTONline (28.09.2015)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-003184

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-003184>