

HANNES BERGTHALLER and CARSTEN SCHINKO, eds., *Addressing Modernity: Social Systems Theory and U.S. Cultures* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 372 pp.

Niklas Luhmann's standing in American academic circles over the past decades in many ways suffered from bad timing. The heyday of American cybernetics, which lasted from the New York Macy Conferences in the late 1940s and early 1950s at least into the 1960s, saw systemic thinking rise to prominence across a wide spectrum of disciplines, including mathematics, information theory, physiology, and psychology. Through the writings of Norbert Wiener, Luhmann's intellectual forebear Talcott Parsons became invested in applying cybernetic tenets to sociology. Having attended Parsons's lectures at Harvard in 1960/61, Luhmann took until 1984 to complete *Soziale Systeme*, his (self-proclaimed) leap forward from both Parsonian social theory and first-wave cybernetics. At this time, the cybernetic moment in American academia had all but passed, leaving Luhmann's growing oeuvre out in the cold on this side of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, debates in American Studies became mired in the trenches of the culture wars, with theoretical impulses streaming in through the transatlantic channels of post-structuralism. A seemingly lifeless super-theory of society with little regard for power structures, representations, or even human subjects could hardly take root in this intellectual climate.

The editors of *Addressing Modernity* may have caught a more timely moment of publication. Among scholars of American literature and culture, Luhmann has recently found followers such as Bruce Clarke and Joseph Tabbi, both of whom contributed to the volume. Additionally, emergent strands of research in the fields of media studies and posthumanism have (re-)discovered Luhmann's writings in their quest to resituate the human subject and its technological environment within the communicative structures of modern societies. Finally, Stanford UP (not Fordham UP, as indicated in *Addressing Modernity*) put out Luhmann's magnum opus *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* in two volumes as *Theory of Society* in 2012/13, fifteen years after its original publication in German. Building on these expedient contexts, Bergthaller and Schinko use their introductory remarks to make a convincing case for a distinct Americanist

perspective on systems theory. In the present, they argue, American Studies converges with Luhmannian thought in its thorough dismissal of the nation state as the primary conceptual bracket of social evolution. The oft-proclaimed transnational turn would thus have cleared the table for a more theoretically rigorous (instead of merely political and normative) description of American cultural evolution. In this endeavor, the nation must cede its place at the helm of the discipline and instead resurface among its objects of observation. The social semantics surrounding the American nation as an imagined community would therefore constitute "a regional adaptation to the new structural conditions produced by the functional differentiation of an incipient world society" (19).

The book contains four thematic sections, the first of which ("Literary Observations") showcases the deep investment of the volume in literary studies. Martin Klepper's opening essay on Henry James and William Dean Howells functions as an excellent portal to the individual chapters. Reflecting on late nineteenth-century realism, Klepper succinctly traces how American literature developed a communicational sphere of autonomy through its turn from the representation of the real to its self-conscious observation. He correlates James's and Howells's poetological writings with Luhmann's comments on art as a social system. Beyond this, he parses canonical texts by Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne to indicate the discursive development of a semantics of literary value that became feasible only after markets and reading publics opened up a specialized niche for *belles lettres*. While Klepper does not undertake a radical rereading of established historiographies, he demonstrates admirably how concepts such as operational closure can be fleshed out in literary analyses.

Christoph Reinfandt and Edgar Landgraf each focus on a single text in their contributions. In T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Reinfandt finds the paradigmatic modernist exploration of literary form, specifically with regard to what he calls "texture," i.e., the material presence of the literary artifact. Yet despite his focus on just one work, Reinfandt presents anything but a close reading. Instead, his essay includes a dense theoretical model of literary mediality alongside a schematic map of Western literary history from the Renaissance to the present. While the scope of Reinfandt's model appears daunting, one feels that

it relegates the literary work to the sidelines. He accordingly speaks of *The Waste Land* as a mere “example” of communicative practices already determined on the theoretical macro-level (80). Where Reinhardt envelops the literary text in a theoretical frame, Landgraf challenges this approach by describing both Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* and Luhmannian systems theory as epistemic programs of sensemaking. Taking off from this analogy, Landgraf argues that DeLillo presents a counter version to operational closure in his “focus on the nodes formed where incongruent systems realities intersect and force an observer to confront and negotiate their incongruence” (88). Other chapters on literature and literary theory engage with the travel writing of Henry James (Ulrich Brinkmann), Thomas Pynchon’s “world-fiction” *Against the Day* (Joseph Tabbi), and the aesthetic import of orality for African American Studies (Schinko) (313).

Several of the remaining essays underscore the self-reflexive pull of Luhmann’s writing, as they provide meta-perspectives on systems theory itself (Hans-Georg Moeller, Gert Verschraegen, Rodrigo Jokisch) or on the field of American Studies (Michael Boyden, Andrew McMurry). The companion pieces by Boyden and McMurry continue recent debates about the evolution of American Studies and provide suggestive readings of the discursive dynamics that propel paradigm shifts and political reversals within the field. Pondering the unlikely rise of Arnold Schwarzenegger to governorship in California, Moeller’s essay teases out the explicatory potential behind Luhmann’s often misinterpreted notions of structural coupling and operational closure. Moeller’s talent to explicate Luhmann and produce lively accounts of systems theory (without trivializing it) is on full display here, as it is in his elegant and accessible recent monograph *Radical Luhmann*.¹ Jokisch then tackles the very broad question: “Why did Luhmann’s Social Systems Theory Find so Little Resonance in the US?” Jokisch conducts a hasty *tour-de-force* through extended soundbites from transatlantic thinkers and statesmen in an attempt to outline ideal national types. Within the volume’s nuanced conceptual frame, Jokisch’s crude, mono-

lithic understanding of “U.S.-American culture” feels somewhat irritating (207).

Overall, I wish to single out Bruce Clarke’s excellent chapter on the *Whole Earth Catalogue (WEC)*, “that premier document of the American counterculture of the late 1960s” (260). In the *WEC*, Clarke finds the ideal material metaphor for the holistic ontologies and pop-philosophies of the day, a printed enactment of the exuberant conjunction between Stewart Brand’s activism, Buckminster Fuller’s and Gregory Bateson’s cybernetic thinking, and the American back-to-the-land movement. In artifacts such as the *WEC*, systemic discourses performed their very own cultural work in a more disordered and popular, but no less complex form than Luhmann’s orderly prose. Essays like those by Clarke, Klepper, and Staeheli—the latter on 19th-century semantics of monetary speculation—are suggestive illustrations of what it means to think with Luhmann, not just like him.

The editors naturally have to walk a tenuous line with regard to their audience, as they attempt to cater both to seasoned Luhmann readers and to relative newcomers. As a result, Bergthaller and Schinko have allowed their contributors to paraphrase systems theoretical tenets at length. Between the individual chapters, some repetitions and redundancies accumulate, so that one begins to wish for a bit less ‘social systems theory’ and for more extended engagement with ‘U.S. Cultures.’ The volume also exposes that the fusion of macro-social theory with common practices of close reading constitutes a distinct methodological challenge. In several instances, there seems to be a logical or historical disconnection between readings of an individual artifact and the abrupt transfer to the hovering strata of society or literature. In general, however, *Addressing Modernity* delivers ample proof that systems theory is a potent but still underrated contender in the theoretical repertoire of American Studies. The editors have initiated a transatlantic dialogue among Americanists that promises to open up fertile ground for further reflection and discussion.

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¹ Hans-Georg Moeller, *Radical Luhmann* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012).