Culture as Text: Reading and Interpreting Cultures

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1. From the 'Anthropological Turn' to 'Cultural Turns'

Since the last decades of the twentieth century, important approaches to cultural analysis from ethnology/cultural anthropology have been adopted by a number of disciplines involved in the study of culture. An ethnological revaluation of culture as a system of signs and meanings has led to the development of new analytical categories. This was especially the case with the interpretation of symbols and rituals, but also in descriptions of culture and experiences of difference, whether in the field of literature or in social practice. These kinds of broad ethnological impulses have led to an 'anthropological turn' (see Bachmann-Medick, *Kultur als Text*)[1] in studies of culture, literature and in the social sciences. But ethnological research itself has also long since gone through its 'cultural turn' as a result of its focus on "collective systems of meaning."[2] Groundbreaking in this respect was the metaphor of 'culture as text,' which has been developed as a 'travelling concept' (see Bal) right across the humanities up to the present. 'Culture as text' became a chiffre for the insight that social life itself is organised through signs and symbols, as well as through representations and their interpretation. As a 'travelling concept,' this notion propagated the far-reaching understanding of culture as both a constellation of texts, and a semiotic fabric of symbols that becomes 'readable' in forms of cultural expression and representation. Significant here is the considerable expansion of what is understood by text to include social practice, as well as the recognition of the dependence of culture on representations in general. This comprehensive textual perspective created a significant new intersection between the social sciences and literary and textual studies. It

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1   The current article is based in parts on the afterword "Bilanz und Perspektive" in my volume *Kultur als Text*. I am grateful to Joanna White for the translation of this article and to Robert Ryder for his helpful suggestions.

2   On the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences see Reckwitz (22); on 'culture as text' see ibid. (445–77); see also Helduser and Schwietring.

led to the inclusion of literary texts within the ensemble of 'cultural texts' and pointed towards reading them within a framework of a "poetics of culture" (Stephen Greenblatt) for their exchanges and 'negotiations' with other discourses.

In this role, 'culture as text' initially proved to be a pivotal bridging metaphor between cultural anthropology and literary studies. Following an admittedly ambivalent career path, the concept of 'culture as text' has nevertheless continued to rise and has become an over-determined general principle, an emphatic key metaphor, even an overall "programmatic motto for the study of culture" (Böhme, Matussek and Müller 134). At first, this concept was still closely connected to ethnographic research and to the semiotic framework of interpretive cultural anthropology.[3] However, since the end of the 1990s it has been utilised to encompass a much broader interdisciplinary horizon for the study of culture. 'Culture as text' advanced from being a conceptual metaphor for the condensation of cultural meanings to a rather free-floating formula frequently referred to in analyses within disciplines involved in the study of culture. Surprisingly, 'culture as text' has remained a consistent key phrase throughout the discourses concerned with the study of culture—even after the culture debate had long since turned away from the holistic understanding of culture implied by the formula.

The frame of discussion has certainly altered significantly in recent years. On the one hand, the anthropological turn led to a more comprehensive debate about the new focus on the study of culture in the various disciplines, for example about literary studies as 'cultural studies.'[4] On the other hand, in the field of the study of culture itself, the 'anthropological turn' gave rise to further 'cultural turns' across several disciplines, whose ever new perspectives continue to shape research practice to the present (performative turn, spatial turn, postcolonial turn, iconic turn, etc.) (see Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*). Furthermore, the internationalisation of literary and cultural research beyond the borders of national cultures and national literatures has been gaining strength for some time. In this context, critical revisions of the concept of culture within cultural anthropology have highlighted symbolic knowledge in its mediations by relations of cultural globalisation beyond fixed cultural or textual borders. Here, the interface between a globalised anthropology and a new reflection on

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3   See Geertz: "culture as an assemblage of texts" ("Deep Play" 448); "cultural forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials" (ibid. 449).

4   From the many works on literary studies as a study of culture, I note here Bachmann-Medick, "Literatur – ein Vernetzungswerk "; Benthien and Velten, *Germanistik als Kulturwissenschaft*; Nünning and Nünning, *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaften*; Schößler, *Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*.

'world literature' in comparative literature must be examined more closely. Is the 'travelling concept' of textuality or even the well-worn 'culture as text' still able to provide any sort of direction?

2. 'Culture as Text' Revisited:
'Readings' of a Key Metaphor in Cultural Analysis

The concept of 'culture as text' arose out of the criticism of mentalism, i.e. of overemphasising mental processes and intentions. Very quickly, the concept rose to become a conviction at the core of a more comprehensive, textually oriented cultural theory. As an indistinct, metaphorical, almost inflated 'travelling concept,' it made its way through the most diverse disciplines—even mutating into "technology as text" in the philosophy of technology and the social sciences (see Beck 238–48), 'sport as text' in sports studies (see Hildenbrandt), and 'genetics as text' in the latest research in the so-called life sciences (see Weigel, "Text der Genetik," which builds on Hans Blumenberg's position "Die Lesbarkeit der Welt"). In historiography, the ethnological idea of 'culture as text' has been used to go beyond a mere history of mentalities and direct attention to the symbolic dimension of historically 'foreign' systems of meaning. These are captured through "thick description"—whether in a social history broadened by cultural history, in micro-histories or histories of everyday life, or in an ethnologically-inspired historical anthropology (see, among others, Medick). In this context, a specific 'textuality of gender' has become visible by linguistic and discursive constructions of gender roles (e.g. through sermons, treatises, mirrors for princes) (see Schnell). In literary studies, the idea of 'culture as text' has stimulated the formation of a productive new perspective on literature as a "text of culture" (see Csáky and Reichensperger). It triggered the opening up of the traditional understanding of a closed text and fixed textual borders more than ever before, up to and including "unstable texts" (see Sabel and Bucher). As the study of texts, literary studies has displayed a tendency to take this key idea literally, and has thus adopted it comparatively uncritically. However, the metaphor of text and reading continued and, following the completion of the full decoding of the human genotype and the listing of its final sequence of letters, went even as far as gene technology (see Weigel, "Text der Genetik"). 'Reading from the book of life' is thus spoken of as if it were a neutral or even harmless matter, when in fact it is a serious intervention into the make-up of human life: the claim that a gene structure is a text ultimately amounts to a perversion of the idea of culture as text. For through this claim, a text's ability to open up spaces of interpretation is being sup-

pressed in favour of computer simulation, information and data network storage, which pave the way for all kinds of manipulation.

One possible starting point for a critical revision of the concept of 'culture as text' is the observation that it has, nevertheless, opened up a *systematic* axis of comparison and connectivity between disciplines. In the future this needs to be developed beyond a restricted model of the text. In doing so, there is above all potential for an understanding of culture that is not limited to singular cultural spaces, but is able to use overarching cultural semiotic relations as an axis of comparison. These kinds of border-crossing connectivities have led, for example, to the opening up of area studies in ethnology, which was previously limited to particular spaces and regions, to a systematic, methodologically and theoretically reflexive cultural anthropology (see Lackner and Werner). The same goes for the advancement of regional studies to a more comprehensive Cultural Studies in foreign language philologies. Not least, systematic axes have become available for an expansion of national philologies into an intercultural comparative literary studies, which exposes itself to world literatures.

Precisely because of its generality, disposition to travel, and broad interpretability, 'culture as text' has become the foundation for such transformations. While this means it has helped to set an overarching "refiguration of social thought" (see Geertz, "Blurred Genres") in motion, the price has been its own inflation and autonomisation as a suggestive "metaphorical refocusing" (Geertz, "Deep Play" 448). Evidently, it never mattered whether talk of 'culture as text' referred to a key idea, a concept, metaphor, analytical model or even paradigm. On the contrary, the concept's potential to stimulate seemed to arise from this very vagueness. For some time now, however, loud cries for its concretisation have resounded within the cultural disciplines. The formulaic ossification found in such metaphors, but also in other terms that have turned into jargon or fashionable 'turns,' needs to be broken apart analytically in order to garner differentiated approaches. In this sense, the all-too graspable 'culture as text' needs to be made provocative again so that we gain a renewed impetus for understanding culture that thrives on 'cultural text' without equating 'culture' with 'text.'

Making something provocative would mean finding a method for explicating a blurry metaphor to the point where it yields an analytical category. 'Contextualisation'[5] might be one method for revealing the interplay between (literary) texts, forms of expression and cultural connections (such as colonialism or Orientalism) at the junctions where they meet. Furthermore, this would open up the ways in which literary texts are in-

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5   On contextualisation/contextualism see Grossberg.

volved in wider forms of cultural representation and staging (rituals, festivals, media performances, etc.) beyond their textual borders. New Historicism, for instance, demonstrated how literary texts are located in a web of connections and relations of exchange and negotiation with other texts, institutions, practices and instances of coding, and how literature as a 'cultural text' of its own interprets and alters a given society's dominant symbolic repertoire or system of signs. Derived from 'culture as text,' this concept of a 'cultural text' was made productive for a broadening of the philologies towards the study of culture—in order to grasp both the possibilities for linking literature to other types of texts and discourses, as well as its interventions into the culturally specific shaping of feeling and behaviour.

As is well known, 'culture as text' is based on an understanding of culture as a structure of meanings in which actions are continually being translated into signs. However, what seems to me to be worth keeping as a shared basis of all disciplines in the study of culture is not the exaggerated objectifying assumption that culture consists of texts in a narrow or broad sense (i.e. that practices, art, string quartets, festivals, etc. can all be conceived of as texts in the same way so that their *structure* of meaning can be revealed). Rather, it is the challenge of developing a 'reading' of perceived reality whereby interpretation remains coupled to the concrete social relations of events and actions: conceiving of culture as text means "constructing a reading of what happens" (Geertz, "Thick Description" 18).

Is this really only to be understood in a strictly textual way? Conceiving of 'culture as text' does not mean taking 'culture' as a metaphor of reading removed from actual practice. Is such a "generalisation of the understanding of *culture as text* over and above the philologies" (Lindner 79) really just the tendency "to see the world merely as a text" (ibid.)?[6] The questioning of cultural analysis as a (supposed) mere reading of a text should not be overstated. Instead, Geertz' own coupling of culture to "enacted statements of […] particular ways of being in the world" (Geertz, *Available Light* 17) should be taken more seriously, since according to Geertz, these enacted statements refer to "transient examples of shaped behavior,"[7] i.e. cultural practices and their contexts and not, for example, to written or even canonical texts.

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6   On the criticism of the reading metaphor as a hermeneutic abbreviation under the erasure of social forms of reading and, above all, usage, see also Algazi (109–10).

7   Geertz: "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" ("Thick Description" 10).

Such a reading, which uses a broader understanding of textualism to gain distinctly praxeological spaces for manoeuvre, can be found in Andreas Reckwitz' model of cultural sociology. Reckwitz' argument aims at a "praxeological understanding of texts" (Reckwitz 606) by interpreting 'culture as text' not under the sign of a mere reservoir of meanings, but rather under the sign of patterns of meaning as "'models' for guiding practice" (ibid. 457), or as a "set of practice dispositions" (ibid. 458). Instead of presupposing an immanent textual meaning, he conceives of a text rather as the result of an attribution of meaning by its recipients. There is a significant point of contact with literary studies here. For in literary studies it is also questionable to assume an autonomous textual meaning, one which "can be determined in the text independently of the attribution of meaning by its participants" (ibid. 587). Are not the "text users,"[8] the readers, crucially involved in the constitution of the meanings and, beyond this, the social use of a text?

While the metaphor of 'culture as text' is used to claim a fixed textual meaning all too quickly, a theory of practice that takes into consideration the meanings created on the part of the reader could also be productive for literary studies. This might even lead to a praxeological revival of reception-based theories of text from the 1970s (e.g. Stanley Fish) (see Reckwitz 606ff.). Here, according to Reckwitz, one might find starting points for a 'literary turn' in those theories of practice in the social sciences that are not looking for a way out of the homogeneity model of culture along a unilaterally mentalistic or textual path. The richest perspectives— also for literary studies—are offered by those theories of practice concerned with multiplying "practices of reception" (ibid. 623) and freeing them from being assigned to a single, homogenous system of meaning. This gives actors the freedom to participate in different systems of meaning, thereby making varying "meaning options" (ibid.) available to them. Actors, according to Gadi Algazi, in no way reproduce the meanings of their own 'culture,' which are hardly transparent even to themselves. Instead they follow social codes of behaviour and pragmatic requirements to carry out certain actions and 'social customs.' These do not have inherent meaning, rather "they represent *potential*, structured options, which take on specific meanings and, more importantly, generate effects only when used" (Algazi 111).

What emerges here is a different understanding of culture, one which "does not reduce [culture] to texts or 'symbols,' but understands it as a heterogeneous and open system of practical options" (Algazi 113). In contrast to the still prevailing culturalistic and textualistic fixing of the 'culture

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8   On a corresponding criticism see Nünning and Nünning, "Kulturwissenschaften" 7.

as text' metaphor, this kind of unconventional, praxeological reading of it opens up new directions and allows challenging conjunctures with contemporary debates on cultural dynamics and cultural hybridity.

3. A Performative Reading of 'Culture as Text'

Up until now, the limits of the concept of 'culture as text' have been discussed in anthropology, history and the social sciences with increasing vehemence (see Lindner 79). Here, the dominant criticism was of the over-proportional fixation on "culture as product" instead of "culture as production," i.e. as an act of creation (see ibid.): the world was only being perceived in textual structures and distorted through a culturalistic lens. Important elements such as cultural dynamics, power relations, situational constraints, intentions, orality, dialogic processes of exchange, and the exact course taken by conflicts remained as much hidden from view as any ineluctable material givens. Opposing this culturalism is

> a pressing desideratum in the study of culture, namely the search for 'cultural translations' of the material, which bestows on a society its order of power-(lessness), and not just the analysis of the realm of the symbolic in its admittedly complex self-referentiality. (Gerbel and Musner 13)

In light of this problematic failure to take the material into consideration, literary studies too is directing new attention to corporeality and to other forms of materiality such as reading and writing—not least through its openness towards recent media theory (see Benthien and Velten, "Einleitung" 13) and performative approaches (see, among others, Fischer-Lichte et al.; Kertscher and Mersch; Martschukat and Patzold; Wirth). The concept of textuality has served its time, as Moritz Baßler et al. write, because "now it is more often a question of media, rituals, communication or memory than of textuality" (Baßler et al. 103; my translation).[9] Texts should be read as "cultural performances" (Benthien and Velten, "Einleitung" 22) that not only represent reality but also constitute it. This heralds a shift in focus from text to practice, eventually resulting in the 'performative turn.' The use and effect of language, the intentions of the speaker and, above all, non-verbal forms of communication are thus expressly included in cultural analysis. This "going beyond words" (see Wikan 186) aims at capturing fields of cultural relations "that reside neither in words, 'facts,' nor text, but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another" (ibid. 190). Thus there is a shift from networks of meaning

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9   In addition, see the somewhat abstract statements on the question of the textuality of culture in Baßler et al.

to relational structures. In literary studies this shift not only concerns the relationship between reader and text but also material and social factors such as corporeality, the shift from orality to written texts (in literatures of the Middle Ages and the early modern period), and ritual, theatricality and literary performance (see Velten 221–22, 228; see also Neumann 25: literary texts "refer in an intricate way to the non-textual substrate of a culture," e.g. to the corporeal, to patterns of movement and to rituals).

Increasingly, the aspect of performativity currently seems to be eclipsing the aspect of representation. Greater attention is being paid to methods of production, patterns of perception and practices of textualisation. Gadi Algazi calls these aspects "productive repertoires" (Algazi 116) and, along these lines, he proposes "understanding literarity as a contested social convention, analysing texts as the exemplification of practical options, and directing attention away from the interpretation of texts to their production […]" (ibid. 114). On the part of literary studies, this would mark an intentional, pragmatic step for overcoming the limitations of 'culture as text.' This step leads in a surprisingly similar direction to other praxeological overcomings of 'culture as text': Susanne Feldmann's "pragma-semiotic analysis" (see Feldmann), for example, which is based on ethnological theories of metaphor and trope, enables a praxis-oriented interpretation of symbols and exposes the role of metaphors and tropes in the formation of practice. In a similar vein, Horst Turk's suggestion of an "operative semantics" (see Turk, "Schlüsselszenarien") brings forms of "self-staging, self-narration, self-description, self-observation and self-reflection" (see Turk, *Grenzgänge* 10) into play under the auspices of performance.

Although literary studies is principally and literally concerned with texts and not primarily with practices, it is precisely the "practices carried out *in* the texts" (Turk, *Grenzgänge* 282) that could be examined in much greater depth. Since in the end, "it is precisely in literary texts that we find the representation and thematisation of *the* discursive and pragmatic routines, with whose help both the differences and the similarities in and between cultures are borne out" (ibid.). Literary texts are not just to be read for content and meaning, or for assumed universal structures (such as death, jealousy, love, dreams, etc.). The attempt to shed more light on "the level of the constitution of practices" in literary texts, rather than just on "the constitution of meaning" (ibid. 8) might constitute a concrete step towards a more comprehensive cultural analysis in literary studies. Here too 'culture as text' turns out to be a travelling concept, one that does not travel in a straight line but that switches levels and thus makes processes of translation necessary.

One starting point for this kind of fundamental change in direction would be overcoming the current overemphasis on thematically centred approaches in the interpretation of literature. Literary texts in particular can direct attention away from the construction of meaning and towards the models and repertoires of practice and attitudes of perception that shape culture—and do so through their aesthetic "invention of scenarios, their provision of paradigms" (Turk, *Grenzgänge* 8). What a corresponding reconnection of reading and interpretation back to this kind of 'scenic happening' and to 'medial perspectives' might actually look like has been shown by Klaus Scherpe in his analyses of speech acts and mimetic behaviour in "first-contact-scenes." These occur as the initial moments of intercultural encounter not only in scenes of discovery, conquest and in situations of ethnographic fieldwork, but also in literary narratives of travel, adventure and colonialism (see Scherpe, "First-Contact-Szene"; on the cultural-theoretical reflection of this kind of a cultural gaze in literary studies see Scherpe, "Kanon – Text – Medium" 21). It is not the meaning of the text which is foregrounded here, but "the phenomenon of medial self-observation" (see Scherpe, "First-Contact-Szene" 157). One might take this kind of shift as a suggestion to investigate literary representations not so much for new themes that are interesting from the point of view of the study of culture, but rather for the way they configure significant forms of practice and communication. From here it is just a short step to an exploration of the forms and means of literary communication and representation itself—the perceptual terms, the contextual relations and (aesthetic) modes of staging, but also the methods and terms which make cultural techniques and culture-specific forms of perception accessible: mimetic practices, fictionalisations, visualisations, narrative structures and attitudes, rituals, metaphors, etc.

The prerequisite for such a critical working out and translation of textualism would be, surely, to mark the differences between textual and pragmatic dimensions more clearly. These differences have become all too blurred through Geertz' "explicitly metaphorical use of textual analysis" (Turk, *Grenzgänge* 137). But culture is not at all the equivalent of text. Rather—as Horst Turk notes in his derivation of Geertz' 'culture-as-text' metaphor using Yuri M. Lotman's cultural theory—we need to hold on to the fact that "alongside the textual 'realisation,' the pragmatic also [remains] valid" (ibid. 133). It is precisely because of the foregrounding of their own constructedness that literary texts should not be interpreted as mere realisations of culture, but as offering a "scope for potentialisation" (ibid. 154).

Yet in the face of such surpluses, even literary studies involved in and reflecting upon the study of culture must pose the question of "readabil-

ity" (see Neumann and Weigel 10): do literary texts really become more
'readable' "through the inclusion of questions of mediality, cultural an-
thropology, of the discourses running through them, of interculturality,
ethnicity" (Barner 81)?[10] "The readability of literary texts is no longer fos-
tered, but rather the readability of cultures (for which, it is true, literature
is only partially necessary)" (ibid.). Should not, as Wilfried Barner writes,
the readability of literary texts in their distinctive aesthetic quality and fic-
tionality be encouraged instead? He states that the strength of an 'open'
cultural research lies precisely in its "'making readable' of that which is
distinguished by its aesthetics, individuality and distinctiveness" (ibid. 87).
But one can hardly read in a comprehensive manner when, at the same
time, the object of that reading is reduced to a single, namely literary,
manner of reading. A multiplication of readings or an "expanded under-
standing of reading" (ibid. 75) are aimed at making aesthetic differences
visible in connection with 'formed behaviour.' Literary texts offer fruitful
openings for this: through the development of their own cultural codes,
practices, cultural techniques, forms of symbolisation and patterns of per-
ception.

4. The Limits of Interpretive Categories:
Patterns of Perception Instead of Thematic References

The long dominance of the text- and meaning-heavy understanding of
culture has led to an exaggerated focus on thematic approaches in literary
studies. The range of new themes and research 'objects' such as dreams,
violence, disgust, hysteria, friendship and honour in literature is virtually
endless. This trend has resulted in a rather reductionist frame of cultural
analysis. It was this narrowing that motivated, amongst other things, a
long-running debate in the *Schiller-Jahrbuch* on the issue of whether literary
studies, by putting on such cultural, interdisciplinary spectacles, was per-
haps losing sight of its actual object.[11] Whatever the case, an orientation
towards new research topics can only ever be a first step towards a cultur-
ally oriented literary studies, since it tends to reduce literature to the status
of a historical/cultural source or even a social report.

   Literary studies might also do more to remind itself that its object not
only represents a text of culture, but also has an intrinsic aesthetic value.

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10   On the question of 'readability' see also Scheffer; on the 'limits of readability' see Weigel,
     "Phantasma der Lesbarkeit" 246.
11   See the debate, initiated by Wilfried Barner, which continued over three volumes of the
     yearbook of the German Schiller Society: *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 42 (1998), 43
     (1999), 44 (2000); see also Bachmann-Medick, "Weltsprache der Literatur."

Despite all efforts in cultural contextualisation, there are demands that justice be done to the aesthetic distinctiveness of the individual literary text. For not only are cultural contents, reflected through literature, the object of a culturally informed interpretation, but also the structures and patterns of aesthetic representation as such. Namely, if something has indeed been lost through the culturally oriented literary reflection of recent years, then this is perhaps less the literary 'object.' Rather, it is the recourse to the aesthetic potential of the literary 'material' and its indispensable analysis of form. The logical consequence would then be to realise more fully the maxim that "[e]very theory must be developed from the material" (Böhme, Matussek and Müller 73) by releasing the ethnographic competence of literature itself. Not literature *and* ethnography, but literature *as* ethnography remains a desideratum. But what is to be understood by this?

One possibility would be to reflect on the "emphatic conception of the textuality of culture itself" (Neumann and Warning 8) and consider the implications of the concept of 'transgression' for 'literature as ethnography.' Transgression means a subversion of cultural relations of meaning and representation. As a new concept in the study of culture, it could work against an all too smooth readability of one's own culture. Transgression is located expressly at the level of "a pattern of perception, description and comprehension" (ibid. 11). Associated practices of boundary-crossing, dissolution of limits, carnivalisation, code-smashing, etc. therefore pertain not only to a mere symbolic creative "crossing-over, for example between the arts, media, discourses, cultural territories or languages and sexes" (ibid. 10). Rather, they pertain to a performative "transgression of […] ritualised incidents" (ibid.) within a culture itself. From the perspective of the study of culture, what seems crucial here is the performative surplus, which is taken up by the term 'transgression.' It is used to point to what might emerge beyond a textualised cultural knowledge and used to stage itself as a counter term to 'ritual.' For where rituals are cultural disciplinary strategies for managing processes of transition, transgressions tend more fundamentally towards a subversive 'restyling' of dominant codes. Through acts of mimesis, through metaphoricity, but also through translation, these kinds of transgressions could assist in the breakthrough of a cultural theory of border-crossing. This could be directed against traditional, dichotomous orders of knowledge and against a knowledge of culture that is only made available through textualisation: "If we want to 'read' a culture, if we want to decode the ensemble of 'cultural texts' it produces, then there is the possibility that we will 'overlook' a residuum that, whilst constitutive of culture, cannot be 'read' because it is not codified, and instead breaks the code: its transgressions" (Teuber

244). Reading literary texts for these not yet textualised cultural "processes of transgression" (Neumann and Warning 11) into the unexplored, and even recognising these as a central border-crossing operation within the process of civilisation—this is what emerges from an understanding of literature *as* ethnography.

Further notable case studies that examine literature as ethnography can be found in the area of medieval studies, which "has always started with a very much wider definition of literature and culture" (Peters, "Neidharts Dörperwelt" 446; see also Müller, "Der Widerspenstigen Zähmung", *Text und Kontext*; Peters, *Text und Kultur*) and which, in dialogue with interpretive approaches from cultural anthropology, has emphasised the alterity of its object. But here, too, the focus of analysis has shifted away from being primarily on literary processes of Othering and on the reflection of the experience of otherness and alterity. Instead—and not just in research on the Middle Ages—the otherness of signs and of the different systems of representation themselves has come to the fore. Literary texts—as has been shown by Gabriele Brandstetter, for example, using Gottfried Keller's novella *Die Berlocken*—can be "ethnographies of one's own culture" (Brandstetter 311). For they can reflect cultural codes and symbolisations as well as a transgressive use of signs. In Keller's case, this is "the becoming other of seemingly familiar signs in cultural exchange" (ibid), namely in a colonial situation, in which these (European) signs are resignified by the colonised.

Thus literary texts can also be analysed within a wider 'anthropological turn' which brings precisely their own patterns of representation and perception to the fore: as possible vehicles for a transgression of their location within the close weave of their own culture. Here, too, of course, the success of such an approach depends on starting literary analysis from junctures rich in potential connections, for example from "key conceptual figures" (Karlheinz Stierle). The 'gift' would be one such defining figure. This is shown by Pamela Moucha's interpretation of Kleist's *Erdbeben in Chili* with her explicit reference to Marcel Mauss' ethnological theory of cultural exchange (see Moucha). These kinds of more structural categories of textual interpretation, taken from ethnological cultural analysis, could also incorporate so-called 'poetogenetic structures.' These are based on antecedent, anthropologically founded modes of behaviour that either form the foundations of literature, are taken up by it or transform it: mimesis, fiction, rhythm, catharsis, narrating, observing, etc. (see Zymner and Engel). However, from here one can all too easily end up with a quite different anthropological framework of a biological, evolutionary anthropology, which tends to stand in opposition to a perspective informed by the study of culture (see, for example, Eibl). Here one is tempted to

search, not unproblematically, for universal anthropological categories via 'poetogenetic structures,' treating 'reading' as just such a category (see Barner 75). Nevertheless, this search throws light on interpretive categories of literature and culture that are not caught up with traditions of cultural meaning: schemata, cultural models, reproductive repertoires, cultural forms of perception and cultural techniques. Using such categories, cultural comparison might be carried out in a less Eurocentric way in the future.

5. Widening the Concepts of Culture and Text: Intercultural and Global Challenges

Discussions in recent years have shown that the critique of a holistic understanding of culture has remarkably far-reaching effects on the politics of culture. It questions a "clash of civilisations" claimed by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington with regard to international relations—above all its problematic presupposition of static cultural blocks that inevitably lead to a politics of confrontation. Conceptual alternatives to such positions are only thinkable alongside a dynamic and open understanding of culture, above all with an understanding of culture as translation and negotiation, as posited by Homi Bhabha and postcolonial theory (see Bhabha). This definition of culture emphasises the fruitfulness of cultural "contact zones" (as investigated by anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt in her analysis of travel reports). It also propagates new "ways of looking at culture (along with tradition and identity) in terms of travel relations" (Clifford, *Routes* 25).[12] The emphasis here clearly lies on the fundamental necessity of dealing with cultural differences, recognising their existence, while at the same time not fixing them as ontological properties. Hybridisation, creolisation, etc. are key categories here, ones that have no place in a concept of culture as text or as a closed system of meaning. An increasingly fragmented "world in pieces"—as even Clifford Geertz has in the meantime made clear—can no longer be held together by any sort of holism: "The vocabulary of cultural description and analysis needs also to be opened up to divergence and multiplicity, to the noncoincidence of kinds and categories" (Geertz, "World in Pieces" 246). This also applies to a global figuration of literatures that can no longer be unified through canonical Western texts and their universalisation of aesthetic standards,

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12   See also Clifford: "Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things" (*Routes* 3).

even if more recent studies in neurobiological research consider "carrying out transcultural comparison and searching for aesthetic universals" (Singer 227) in the field of art and literature to be a particularly fertile research area.

In the disciplines involved in the study of culture, however, the issue of transcultural comparison is derived from and modified by the interweaving of societal processes themselves, from the contact between cultures and the 'hybrid' overlappings of very diverse layers of experience and affiliations caused by migration and diaspora. Especially since the collapse of colonial dichotomies and a fixed constellation of nation states, cultural systems can hardly be viewed as standing vis-à-vis one another anymore. Rather, cultures and literatures take shape in contact zones with their mix of cultures and pragmatic demands for border-crossings on both sides, with their conflicts and attempts at reconciliation. Thus the idea of 'culture as text' is on its way to being transformed or even replaced by an explicitly non-holistic and dynamic concept of culture: by the idea of culture as a process of translation and negotiation (that acknowledges differences and power asymmetries and therefore perhaps cannot be easily adopted as a travelling concept). One of the results of this concept transformation is the current emergence of translation as a powerful analytical category in the humanities and social sciences (see Bachmann-Medick, "Translational Turn").

In this context, the relationships between text and meaning also have to be rethought in more complex ways: as being implicated in power relations, in processes of a negotiation of meaning in intercultural contact scenarios, and in processes of hybridisation through transnationality and globalisation. The increasing scope of textual reflection in literary studies points in this direction, promoting a "theory of texts that brings the enactment of dispositions, positions and constraints of order both *in* as well as *between* cultures into view" (Turk, *Grenzgänge* 156), meaning that literary texts cannot be ascribed to the texts of *one* culture, and certainly not in the sense of canonical texts. Such models of texts *between* cultures will only really come into their own when, starting from the specific textual horizon of these texts, there is an attempt to widen the analysis to the global circulation of texts in general. Just as cultural anthropology did not stop at the analysis of foreign (tribal) cultures but has transnationalised itself to become a macro-ethnology of the global age (see Marcus), so literary studies faces the challenge of locating itself within the emerging world society. This means dealing to a greater extent with non-European literatures, with

texts *between* cultures, and with literatures of the world in a new way.[13] Yet literary studies could also bring its own 'philological competence' to bear on the global stage of world politics. Indeed, in recent times, 'philological competence' is again being hailed as a foundation stone of critical humanities, even by postcolonial cultural theory. It can be applied to counter-abbreviated and pre-fabricated societal slogans through philologically trained research competence that does justice to the details of real situations and exposes rhetorical decorations in the fields of politics and media (see Said).

Literature, literary studies and studies of culture generally have undergone a shift into new fields of research through these kinds of transnational awakenings. This shift is a result of the hybridisations which become tangible as cultural overlappings, incontemporaneities, hierarchies of power, as third spaces of homelessness and in-between existences (see Bhabha), as well as conflictual, charged spaces of intercultural debate. These hybrid spaces emerge especially in the field of postcolonial literature and cultural theory, as well as in the literature of migration (see Chiellino; Gögtürk, Gramling, and Kaes). In general, they give shape to a "new comparative literature" as an issue of global translational relations (see Apter). Can concrete approaches to intercultural literary comparison be drawn from such a frame of reflection? One might think here, for example, of Vibha Surana's culturally contrastive comparison of a European novel (Goethe's *Werther* of 1774) and a Hindi novel (Agyeya's *Shekhar: ek Jivani* of 1941–44) focussing on significant cultural differences in the discourse of love—which, in addition, also makes use of the "microscopic" procedure of "thick description" (Surana, *Text und Kultur* 233). It is the literary texts themselves that interculturally expand and rupture the ethnographic process of representing cultures. This also applies to Thomas Mann's adaptation of a mythical Indian story in his novella *Die vertauschten Köpfe. Eine indische Legende* (1940) ['The Transposed Heads. A Legend of India'] and its later reworking in the Indian drama with the same motif, *Hayavadana* (1969), by Girish Karnad (see Surana, "Kulturdynamik"). Given these kinds of complex trans- and intercultural interrelations and entanglements, a major question arises: To what extent are yet more marked transgressions necessary that not only performatively 'loosen' the 'travelling concept' of the text from its European robe, but develop explicitly comparative categories of analysis with a cross-cultural texture?

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13   For approaches to this see Schmeling, Schmitz-Emans and Walstra; on the current discussion on world literature see, amongst others, Meyer-Kalkus; Prendergast; Simonsen and Stougaard-Nielsen.

A broadening of the horizon towards globalisation is more than just a performative shift of emphasis in the understanding of culture and text to include corporeality, theatricality, ritual, representation and practice. It demands the inclusion of media and the mediated sphere of 'imagination,' as conceptualised by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai as the scene of the global, transnational production of culture (see Appadurai). It also calls for assessing world communication from the perspective of media theory (see Bolz, Kittler, and Zons). Recently, the emerging categories in the theory of culture of space and mapping that have fostered a 'spatial turn' are being taken up at variance to the focus on national cultures—not only in history and the social sciences (see, for example, Schlögel), but especially in literary studies, and even within literature itself (see Weigel, "Topographical Turn").

For literary studies, the broadening of the horizon towards a translational and spatial "poetics of displacement" (Clifford, *Predicament* 10) sketched here represents a massive challenge to every form of national philology. Disciplinary key terms or 'travelling concepts' such as 'text,' 'author,' 'work,' 'influence' and 'tradition' are also affected by this and complemented by categories such as 'discontinuity,' 'break,' 'difference,' 'translation' and 'border.' The long journey of the concept of culture and/as text is thus far from being over. Travelling beyond its semiotic stations, it opens up ever more explicit political perspectives for the study of literature and culture: cultural comparison, research into text- and language-mediated transcultural relations and translations and, not least, a critique of the canon aimed at putting an end to the centuries-long universalisation of Western aesthetic norms.

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