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Writing the Social. Editorial

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The Return of the Sociology of Literature

In recent years, literary studies have proclaimed a »social turn« (Stiemer/Bücker/Sanchino Martinez 2017), while the social sciences have conversely heralded a »literary turn« (Hammersley 2023). Or, to put it in a different way, the sociology of literature is making a comeback in both disciplines. In general, disciplines have a tendency to resume long neglected fields of research in order to achieve gains in innovation. This certainly also applies to the sociology of literature. Interest in the sociology of literature waned after the projects of a social history of literature (Huber/Lauer 2000; Schönert 2007) and the history of reception (Grimm 1977) came to an end. The theoretical frameworks of Niklas Luhmann (1997) and Pierre Bourdieu (1999) were not succeeded by similarly ambitious projects. What followed were refinements, differentiations and expansions of the two models and their application in numerous case studies. The system-theoretically oriented works of Siegfried J. Schmidt (1989), Niels Werber (1992), and Gerhard Plumpe (1995), as well as those attached to field theory by Joseph Jurt (1995), Pascale Casanova (1999), Gisèle Sapiro (2014), Markus Joch and Norbert Christian Wolf (2005), and Heribert Tommek (2015) are particularly noteworthy here.

However, possible gains in innovation alone do not explain the return of a sociological interest in literature. After literary studies' orientation towards constructivist concepts of communication, discourse and knowledge, there has been a shift towards materiality, mediality, institutions, practices, reception and big data in recent years. In sociological theory, a similar development can be observed from (post-)structuralist approaches to performative and praxeological theories. The sensual appearance in the sense of aesthetics and, consequently, the study of effects, emotional engagement, and evaluation have come to the fore.

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This special issue, *Writing the Social*, takes as its point of departure the rekindled interest in the sociology of literature in literary studies and the social sciences, and aims to channel this development into productive inquiry. We argue that resurgent approaches to the sociology of literature are emerging as an interdisciplinary practice of *doing social theory*. The articles in this issue reflect these approaches, each in its own way serving as both a performance of and a reflection on this theoretical enterprise. The growing theoretical and methodological exchange between literary studies and sociology is fostering a convergence of these two disciplines within the sociology of literature, creating a field that resists distinct disciplinary boundaries. This trend is partly fuelled by contemporary literature's strong focus on social issues such as inequality, marginalization, and identity (Balint et al. 2021). Conversely, contemporary sociological diagnoses and ethnographic writing increasingly align with the principles of a public sociology (Burawoy 2021). This shift reflects a revitalized enthusiasm for essayistic writing and storytelling, often incorporating distinctly literary genres and styles (Amlinger 2023). This special issue examines these interdisciplinary research movements, which manifest in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways, while remaining deeply rooted in the methodological traditions of their originating disciplines.

In the realm of theory *production*, a thriving exchange has emerged between literary studies and the social sciences. Since the narrative turn, qualitative social sciences have advocated for liminal writing practices that bridge professional knowledge production and public reception (Agger 2000; Goodson/Gil 2011; Hyvärinen 2016). Expressive narratives became increasingly recognized as tools for fostering reflexive insights into society. In order to achieve this, sociology has turned to literary studies, drawing on narratology, character and metaphor analysis, and theories of the imaginary (Lüdemann 2004; Abbott 2007; Grummt 2022; Leavy 2013; Farzin/Laux 2014; Moser/Schlechtriemen 2018; Polletta 2006; Taylor 2003). In return, literary studies increasingly examined self-experimental writings from the social sciences for their liminal textual status, as evidenced by the continuing interest in the genre of autosociobiography (Blome/Lammers/Seidel 2022; Spoerhase 2017).

Questions about the social *circulation* of texts are examined using an interactionist microsociological approach. This lens focuses on the intimate »patterns of collective activity« (Becker 1982). Ethnographically informed studies of literary production include Griswold (2000), Childress (2017), and Thumala Olave (2020). Qualitative social research methods and document analyses, such as those by Amlinger (2021) and Chong (2020), are also central to this area. Studies influenced by book history and publishing studies (Füssel/Norrick-Rühl 2013) have explored editor-author collaborations (Schneider 2015; Barner 2021; Mohs/Zimmermann/Caffari 2019). Other studies address global distribution channels (Xavier 2016; Kirsch 2016;

McGurl 2021), digital media formats (Darnton 2009; Hagner 2015; Pressman 2020; Striphas 2009; Lauer 2020; Hayles 2021), and social interactions with books (Mani 2017; Price 2019; Griem 2021). The interplay between literary actors and their audience-oriented strategies, competition (Jürgensen/Kaiser 2011; Kyora 2014), their fictionalization (Assmann 2014; Goggio 2021), and canon formation (Guillory 1993) has been critically studied from a praxeological perspective. English (2005) and Sapiro (2009) use quantitative data to analyze cultural capital dynamics. At a macrosociological level, Moretti (2016) explores the life cycle of genres and canonization, a concept extended by Santana-Acuña's (2020) theory of global classicization.

Reception studies have shifted from reader response theory's focus on the text (Jauß 1970) to emphasizing readers' creative agency (Franzen 2024; Felski 2015; Willis 2017). Transformative processes like rewriting and adaptation are explored by Hutcheon (2012) and Sanders (2016). Sociological research complements this shift by examining the physical and affective dimensions of reading practices (McLaughlin 2015; Krey 2020).

This brief and by no means exhaustive overview of emerging approaches and methods highlights the diverse range of issues in literary theory currently being explored under the umbrella of the sociology of literature. Key questions include: How can liminal writing practices be more precisely defined within literary theory as a boundary-crossing endeavor between sociological knowledge production and literary narration? In what ways does expressive storytelling contribute to generate reflexive perspectives on society? How does sociology adopt the tools of literary theory for social analysis? How are concepts of literary criticism (such as metaphor or figure) transformed when applied to social phenomena? What are the implications for literary theory when social interactions are understood as the collaborative processes behind literary texts? Finally, how does the literary text itself change when it is treated as a data set for quantitative analysis?

What Does Writing the Social Mean?

The concept of writing the social is particularly well-suited to address diverse questions such as these. It strikes a balance between abstraction and concreteness, enabling an exploration of the interaction between literature and sociology through the lens of literary theory. It is abstract enough to describe the mutual exchange between literature and sociology without being limited by epistemological, genre-theoretical, socio-structural, disciplinary, or other similar presuppositions. It is, at the same time, specific enough to analyze hybrid literary-sociological forms. This also enables the analysis of complementary or demarcating movements within

textual practices. Therefore, we will draw on two concepts of writing (*Schreibweisen* and *écriture*) in literary theory.

In genre theory, following the French literature scholar Klaus Hempfer, the concept of modes of writing (in German *Schreibweisen*) refers to textual complexes that transcend individual genres. In this sense, a mode of writing encompasses characteristics of texts that can be identified as recognizable »constants« (Hempfer 1973, 27), shaping a »group-forming structure« that identifies what is common to otherwise disparate historical genres (Hempfer 2007, 391).¹ The German literature scholar Rüdiger Zymner further elaborates that genre theory uses the concept of modes of writing to focus on the »media-specific manifestations of general, formative or shaping techniques« (Zymner 2007, 25). The notion of technique originates with the Russian literature scholar Viktor Šklovskij, who approached the construction of art from a formalist perspective. In his 1917 essay »Art as Technique« (Russian: »Iskusstvo kak priem«), »technique« (Russian: *priem*) refers to the »arrangement and processing of word materials« (Šklovskij 1971, 5). From a genre-theoretical point of view, modes of writing are thus relatively constant, historically grounded techniques of written texts that are not necessarily confined to specific genres.

The second use of the term writing is found within (post-)structuralist literary theory. Referencing French literary critic Roland Barthes' essay »Writing Degree Zero« (published in French as »Le degré zéro de l'écriture« in 1953), »writing« can be understood as a translation of the concept of *écriture*. Barthes distinguishes writing from both the language system and individual style, defining it as a conglomerate of linguistic forms of expression (Barthes 2006, 10). This form of writing exists beyond, on the one hand, grammatical rules or linguistic conventions, and the personal, biographical dispositions of the writer; on the other. For Barthes, it is the mode of creating literature, which he explores under the concept of writing (Barthes 2006, 19).

While genre theory tends to view the modes of writing as the supra- or a-historical text structures, in contrast to the historically variable nature of genres, Barthes' use of the term writing is both historically situated and normatively oriented. In the context of the journal *Tel Quel* during the 1960s and 1970s, he linked the concept of *écriture* to the play of signifiers, opposing literary writing that is rooted in realism, plot, convention, and meaning. Barthes' programmatic call for »writing degree zero« focuses on the act of writing itself, shifting attention away from traditional narrative structures. The pleasure of the text (*plaisir du texte*) is considered the sig-

1 All translations of quotes are provided by the authors of the editorial.

nificant feature of *écriture*, which seeks to dissolve the boundaries between writing and reading (*lecture*) (cf. Campe 2007).

Despite their differences, the genre-theoretical and (post-)structuralist uses of the term modes of writing share a form- and function-oriented approach to texts, focusing on the how of representation. For this reason, beyond its supratemporal genre-theoretical conception and its programmatic formulation as *écriture*, the concept of modes of writing is particularly productive for our approach. In contrast to, yet loosely following Hempfer and Barthes, we understand writing as a flexible collection of rhetorical, medial, performative, and narratological techniques employed in written texts. By conceptualizing writing in this way, we can avoid to force sociological and literary texts into a rigid, preconceived relationship. Instead, from the perspective of writing, literature and sociology can be treated comparably within a text-theoretical and poetological framework, allowing for an examination of their written forms.

This brings into focus questions about the modes of representation, such as the use of narrative or descriptive elements, key concepts and metaphors, taxonomies, examples, or types and figures. Beyond these microtextual approaches, the macro-textual organization and the overall structure of the text can also be studied. This includes the coordination of analytical passages and illustrative descriptions, as well as borrowings from established ways of structuring subjects and arguments such as genres. Additionally, textual pragmatics can influence the approach, shifting attention to the perspective, particularly regarding how the writer's position is either revealed or concealed. Finally, the speech act of the text itself, along with the implied audience, can be considered. Writing the social could cross disciplinary or epistemological boundaries, ranging from novels or fictional narratives – not only canonical or avant-garde, but also popular ones – to journalistic or essayistic texts, as well as qualitative and quantitative studies in empirical social research.

The term the social is also chosen particularly for its ambiguous meaning (Zimmermann 1948; Geck 1963). In »The ›Objectivity‹ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy«, Max Weber already pointed out that it is »no accident that the concept of ›the social,‹ which seems to have a very general meaning, always carries a rather specific, nuanced, though often vague meaning when we examine its use; the ›general‹ in this case is actually just its vagueness« (Weber 1991, 44 sq.). The vagueness, however, does not necessarily need to be a disadvantage. It avoids the problem of using a term that is already tied to a specific theoretical framework – like field or system – or one that carries a multitude of conflicting definitions, such as society. The term the social, in contrast, has no systematically defined meaning in any social theory. Its particular, specifically nuanced meaning does not need to remain undefined. The contributions to this special issue develop their interpretations of the concept based on the texts they examine, enabling them to define its

meaning in precise terms. However, and perhaps predictably, they do not all assign it the same meaning.

No text is able to simply mirror the social. It is alone the specific conditions of the written medium, that do prevent this. Even if the contributions to this special issue lay the focus on contemporary texts – rather than on the transformation in which way the social has been described over time, which is Luhmann's particular interest (1998, 893–1149) – the following historically conditioned premises must be taken into account: It was only in the second half of the 18th century that the social was increasingly understood as an independent sphere, irreducible to other spheres. It was comprehended as a realm of conditioned freedom apart from natural causality on the one side, and on the other side from transcendental freedom, to put it in Kant's terms. This conception of the social as a distinct ontological and epistemological domain requires autologously the assumption that definitions of the social are themselves socially produced. In the form of self-descriptions the social is imagined as a unity. They do circulate socially. Since imaginary constructions must always generate their unity through selective processes, their claims to universality and validity remain inherently contested.

Two key moments in history have shaped the way in which the social has been described. *First*, the discovery of the social is closely tied to the emergence of the modern concept of literature, which began to be seen as a social domain governed by its own internal laws, reflected by rules of writing. As literature gained autonomy, it began to create truly literary self-descriptions of the social, embedding itself within these depictions – essentially functioning as a form of literary sociology *avant la lettre*. In this way, literature played a crucial role in shaping the concept of the social (Büttner 2015). At the same time, although early attempts were made to formulate scientific self-descriptions of the social, it was not until about a century later that the social sciences were able to establish themselves as academic disciplines, with their own distinct rules of writing (Harvey Brown 1989; 1992). *Second*, the social sciences' description of literature as a specific domain within the social can be seen as a narrowing of the focus in self-descriptions of the social. Although modern literature and sociology emerged at different times, their overlapping approaches to describing the social have led to various phases in their relationship, including competition, complementarity, and convergence (Lepenies 1985; Muzmics/Mozetič 2003; Magerski/Steuerwald 2023). A convergence of poetic techniques employed in writing the social can be observed in the current phase addressed in this special issue.

The connection between these two movements in the concept of writing the social draws attention to the question of how texts themselves address social relations, while at the same time reflecting on their own textuality. Without accepting its normative-programmatic impulse, one can rely on Barthes' conceptualization.

Barthes views the association between writing and the social as already inherent. Since *écriture* is located in the »relationship between the created and society« (Barthes 2006, 18), it can, on the one hand, be understood as the result of a »confrontation of the writer with society« (Barthes 2006, 19). On the other hand, the mode of writing forces the writer »in a tragic way, from this societal functionality, back onto the instrumental origins of his work« (Barthes 2006, 19). In this sense, writing the social would always involve methods of textual representation of social relations, too, that not only reaffirm their own sociality but also their textuality.

The Contributions to this Issue

This special issue brings together contributions that explore writing the social from both literary and social science perspectives. Drawing on literary history and theory, narratology, praxeology, social theory, and both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the papers combine literary theory with sociological questions. Despite their diversity, they share a common goal: to adopt a dual perspective on both, the ways of writing the social and social aspects of writing. On the one hand, the contributions argue that writing the social does not merely represent the social in textual form. Rather, writing the social plays an active role in creating the social by shaping ideas and definitions of the social. On the other hand, the contributions examine the social nature of writing the social, emphasizing that these modes of writing are the product of social negotiation processes, that is, they are socially constructed rather than self-evident.

JAN VÁÑA's study challenges the classical sociology of literature, which often treats literature as a passive object or mere dependent variable. Drawing on the Yale School of Cultural Sociology, Váňa instead emphasizes the aesthetic and symbolic autonomy of literary works, advocating for a more balanced view that sees literature and other social phenomena as interdependent. Using Sally Rooney's *Normal People* as a case study, Váňa illustrates how literature not only mirrors social realities – it actively shapes them. He interprets Rooney's novel not as a form of scientific analysis but as an aesthetic mode of social theory. Through its literary techniques, *Normal People* brings to light the subtle, emotional, and often unspoken structures of social life, rendering them vivid and tangible. Váňa introduces the concept of *iconic experience* to explore the dynamic interplay between author, text, and reader. His article argues that the sociology of literature needs to fully engage with the unique logic of literary works. By doing so, one can appreciate literature not only as a lens for understanding society but also as a creative social force with its own agency.

MARC ORTMANN's study takes a similar track, focusing on the literary-theoretical status of *liminal texts* – those that straddle the boundaries between sociology and literature. Drawing on Victor Turner's concept of liminality, Ortmann describes these texts as occupying an in-between space, bridging disciplines and challenging established structures. Such texts are not only aesthetic but also transformative, serving as events that provoke the reorganization of their respective fields. Ortmann's analysis centers on liminal phases where social fields intersect, boundaries shift, and the role of liminal actors comes to the forefront. These actors, often individuals who have personally navigated transitions between social classes or fields, possess a split habitus. Their dual perspective allows them to portray the tensions and divides of the social world in their writing. These texts blend social science and literature, subjectivity and objectivity, and in doing so, they disrupt the traditional logics of both domains. A key focus of Ortmann's study lies on autosociobiographies, which weave personal and collective experiences together. He highlights authors like Annie Ernaux, who fuses autobiographical storytelling with sociological analysis to explore social transitions and the fragmentation of social spaces. Ernaux's use of concepts like Pierre Bourdieu's split habitus reflects her position as someone who has traversed social class boundaries. Her work, Ortmann argues, exemplifies the liminal text by merging literary and sociological approaches, revealing the structures of the social world through keen observation of everyday life. Ortmann concludes, much like Váňa, that liminal texts offer interpretations of social upheavals and possess the potential to actively drive social change.

EVA BLOME's contribution explores the tensions between disciplines that emerge from cross-border modes of writing, focusing on autoethnography as a precursor to autosociobiography. Blome examines autoethnography as a literary-theoretical challenge, defining it as a method that uses personal experiences (*auto*) as a lens to systematically analyze and represent cultural phenomena (*ethno*). She provides both a historical and systematic overview of the genre, tracing its roots to social anthropology and the reflection on ethnographic representation sparked by the 1980s writing culture movement. Like Ortmann, Blome references Annie Ernaux, illustrating how autoethnography merges an author's subjective self-perception with a detached, ethnographic perspective to investigate cultural and social dynamics. However, Blome carefully differentiates autoethnography from autosociobiography, which specifically addresses social issues through autobiographical reflection. Despite this distinction, both genres share a liminal quality, blending personal narrative with analytical methods to examine broader cultural or social structures. Blome further identifies autoethnography as a »travelling genre«, emphasizing its role in reflecting global dynamics and processes of cultural exchange. She highlights how the genre reconfigures and temporarily stabilizes diverse textual forms and narrative techniques. By doing so, autoethnography not only bridges the per-

sonal and the cultural but also fosters a transnational perspective, making it a key tool for understanding the complexities of a globalized world.

Modes of writing the social, such as autosociobiography and ethnography, contribute more than merely adding to our understanding of social contexts – they also possess a social dimension of their own, emerging from negotiation processes that can be analyzed praxeologically. SARAH NIENHAUS and FABIENNE STEEGER's contribution takes this perspective, exploring the historical roots of the current surge in autosociobiographical writing through the works of Annie Ernaux and Didier Eribon. Nienhaus and Steeger investigate the informal practices and collaborations that have linked autosociobiography so closely with Suhrkamp Verlag in the German-language literary sphere. Drawing on materials from the publisher's archive their praxeological analysis highlights the interplay between authors and publishing house employees in shaping modes of writing the social. They use two key texts to illustrate this dynamic: Karin Struck's *Klassenliebe* (1973) (not translated into English: Class Love) and Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* (1992) (engl. *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, 2001). The publication of *Klassenliebe* in Suhrkamp's *edition suhrkamp* series was pivotal, establishing Struck as a trailblazer of New Subjectivity and cementing the book's success. In contrast, Suhrkamp's rejection of Klüger's *weiter leben* marked a turning point for Wallstein Verlag, which published the work to great acclaim. This decision proved a fortuitous stroke of luck for the fledgling publishing house, which gained significant symbolic capital from Klüger's prominence as an author. Through their analysis, Nienhaus and Steeger reveal how the processes of collaboration and institutional decision-making within the publishing world have shaped the development and reception of these modes of writing the social.

The concept of the social type (in German *Sozialfigur*) represents a mode of writing the social that, while rooted in sociology, holds significant relevance for literary theory. In his contribution, KEVIN KEMPKE examines this dual perspective, noting that sociology primarily focuses on the social index of the type, while literary studies are more concerned with the techniques of representation. Social types occupy a unique position, appearing in both literary and sociological contexts as symbols for latent social structures. Kempke investigates the representational techniques that give social types their diagnostic and expressive power. He argues that these types operate as a mode of writing that bridges macro-sociological assumptions with micro-sociological forms of representation. Positioned in this »middle ground«, social types aim to depict social conditions in a condensed manner. However, Kempke highlights that these types are not direct reflections of social reality but are instead constructed through processes of observation, condensation, and abstraction. As textual phenomena, they maintain a distance to the social realities they seek to represent. By analyzing the techniques behind their creation, Kempke demonstrates that social types not only function as mirrors of

society but as interpretative tools, shaped by the interplay of literary and sociological methodologies.

ANNA MUENCHRATH's essay brings this special issue to a close by examining the methodological tensions surrounding the use of computer-based methods in the sociology of literature. She investigates the epistemological and methodological potential of digital humanities approaches, that view texts not simply as reflections of their production contexts but also as data for analyzing human behavior and historical processes. Muenchrath introduces the concept of a computational sociology of literature to describe these hybrid approaches. This emerging field integrates the critical tradition of textual interpretation with data-driven methodologies, offering fresh perspectives on literature. Through a meta-analysis of foundational works by scholars such as Franco Moretti, Ted Underwood, and Richard Jean So, Muenchrath demonstrates how computational sociology of literature bridges descriptive and interpretative approaches. However, she also addresses the methodological and hermeneutical challenges posed by these techniques. The interpretative gap between the correlations and patterns identified through statistical hermeneutics and their historical-social meanings is the key issue here. Muenchrath emphasizes the need to critically engage with the noise in data, suggesting that these irregularities can yield unexpected insights and inspire new lines of inquiry. In conclusion, Muenchrath calls for a nuanced approach that balances computational tools with traditional hermeneutic methods, ensuring that the sociology of literature continues to evolve as both an interpretative and empirical discipline.

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