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Interpretation in Empirical Studies of Literature and Media

From their beginning in the 19th century literary studies have been rooted in the hermeneutic credo that the investigation of cultural artifacts differs fundamentally from the scientific explanation of ›natural‹ objects. As a consequence, literary studies have declared the hermeneutic interpretation of single works of fiction and poetry their key agenda. As Jannidis et al. have pointed out, the act of literary ›interpretation‹ aims at the rule-guided reconstruction of the meaning of a text as whole; interpretation cannot be equated to meaning, – which figures as the result of interpretation –, but represents a complex procedure of the ›assignment of meaning‹. Accordingly, in literary studies the term interpretation is embedded into a wide range of theories of semantics, cognition, and communication that define criteria for the assignment of meaning to a literary text.

Moreover, the term interpretation encompasses assumptions about how to theorize and validate phenomena in the fields of semantics, cognition, and communication (methodology and meta-theories respectively). Last, but not least, literary researchers usually formulate texts and use media in order to interpret literary texts, that is, the results of scientific investigation require interpretation in return. Thus, as has been pointed out by constructivist scholars, there is a peculiar ›autologic‹ at work in literary studies and media research respectively. Facing the multi-faceted nature of the phenomenon in question, I will discuss the meaning of ›interpretation‹ in empirical studies of literature and media on three levels, namely the epistemology, object theory, and methodology of interpretation. My argument will unfold as follows:

I will first examine interpretation as an epistemological category that lays ground for non-dualistic positions in empirical studies in literature and media. This examination explores the autologic of observation and deals with the self-description of the research process by means of self-reflection. I will briefly portray the idea of interpretation in constructivist epistemology, where it converges with the idea of ›construction‹ as the complex interplay of natural and cultural operations in a self-organized cognitive system that brings forth the world.

I will then turn to the history of empirical studies of literature and media (ESLM). A short excursion back to the German origins of ESLM in the 1970s will demonstrate that the question of interpretation is inescapably amalgated with the way literary scholars define their object of investigation and, hence, with the way researchers decide on the relevance of research problems and research designs. An exemplary controversy on the theoretical status and necessity of literary interpretation in early ESLM between Norbert Groeben and Siegfried J. Schmidt will serve as a case in point. The shared theoretical core assumption of different

positions in ESLM, the functional concept of text, will then pave the way to outline a current model of literary interpretation that draws upon media psychology, empirical aesthetics, and communication theory. In light of this model the assessment of interpretation as »the assignment of meaning« will be explicated as the process of literary reception, which, depending on the underlying theories of cognition and/or communication, encompasses a number of physical, cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural operations. As a particular form of aesthetic knowledge the interpretation of literary texts is realized in different action roles with different degrees of professional expertise.

On a background of the outlined object theory of literary interpretation, I will thirdly substantiate crucial aspects of both non-professional and expert reading through a selection of empirical research results from various disciplines. Studies will be introduced that investigate the selection of reading materials and reading motivation, the perception of poetic text structures and stylistic devices, reading strategies as well as emotional and cognitive effects of reading and social systems of literary evaluation. This exemplary ramble through contemporary empirical research enterprises aims at concretizing the empirical meaning of »interpretation« in empirical studies of literature and media.

In a fourth and last step, I will shortly examine interpretative aspects of empirical research. Taking on a constructivist point of view, I will mark the collection and the analysis of empirical data as an interpretative act, which underlies both qualitative and quantitative research strategies in empirical studies of literature and media. Hence, the last section will close my argument with a feedback loop between epistemology, methodology and object theory.

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