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# Reading Ornament

## Remarks on Philology and Culture

*Till Dembeck, Université du Luxembourg*

This paper puts the most fundamental philological operation into the center of the theory of culture: the seemingly trivial act of recognizing the shape of a letter in the "ornamental" abundance of the material text. Culture is described as a comprehensive term for all mechanisms, which interrelate social events with their "scripts," that is to say, with their proto-textual foundations. Culture continuously, but variably, determines what is actually significant in the potential ornaments of "social text." The common quest of philology and cultural studies is to re-evaluate this text's seemingly ornamental details and to uncover their significance. In order to reunite these only seemingly oppositional approaches, literary scholarship must put genuinely philological operations in the center of its methodological repertoire.

*Keywords: Philology, culture, figure/ornament, text, interpretation, art.*

The invention of "culture" in the eighteenth century has eminently changed the way Western society looks at itself as well as "other" societies (see Williams 1958, Perpeet 1984, Luhmann 1995). Still the usefulness of the concept may be contested: Culture is far from being conclusively defined, and it is evident that the insistence on so-called cultural identities fuels some of the most difficult conflicts of the present – when, for example, human rights violations are defended as cultural peculiarities against a Western public that holds human rights to be universal. This paper concedes that many applications of the term may indeed be unhelpful or misleading. But it holds that a concise account of the concept can still uncover new perspectives – the exploration of which needs philological means.

The argument is driven by the strategic claim that the opposition between philology and cultural studies (in the broadest sense of the

term), which often grounds discussions in literary scholarship, is not relevant beyond the tactics of scholarly competition. On the contrary, many "cultural turns" we have seen in recent decades have been stimulated by a philological impulse: the scrupulous care for seemingly "ornamental" details, and the re-evaluation of their potential significance. This paper's central claim is that philology's fascination with reading ornament unalterably links it to those mechanisms we are used to subsume under the term "culture." A reassessment of the culture concept in philological terms is therefore enriching for both sides. It might even help to overcome the division between "literary criticism" on the one hand and *Literaturwissenschaft* ("science of literature") on the other, for both the critically engaged assessment of literature and culture and its "scientific" study must cultivate the ornamental, "material" basis of (social) text if they want to establish any stability of meaning – which at the same time, and by precisely this recursion to the "material" basis, is once more opened up to further questioning.[1]

In the following, I propose to put the most fundamental philological operation, the seemingly trivial act of recognizing the shape of a letter in the ornamental abundance of the sensual data to be observed in the material text, into the center of the theory of textuality and communication (II). This leads to a philological description of culture, giving the metaphor of "reading culture" an alternative foundation (III), and finally highlighting the function and significance of literary scholarship in society (IV). I start with some preliminary remarks concerning my concept of philology and its relation to the difference between text and communication as it has been described by modern sociological and philological theories (I).

## *I. Preliminaries: Philology, text, and communication*

In literary scholarship, there is an established division of labor between the editorial constitution and the interpretation of text. This gap is wide open even today, although already in the 1950s scholars such as Windfuhr claimed that "edition is interpretation" (Windfuhr 1957, 440: "Edition ist Interpretation").[2] According to the unspoken dogma that underlies this separation, textual criticism is concerned with deciphering documents and making them available in scholarly editions. Its "positivistic" approach

treats the word "only" as an object, while for interpretation it is subject to the perils of hermeneutic questioning.[3] In recent years, however, editorial endeavors in medieval and modern philology as well as recent developments in media studies called this division of labor into question. In the 1990s, for example, "new" or "material" philology proposed to base the interpretation of medieval text solely on its original and therefore highly variable "material" basis instead of reading the seemingly stable texts constituted by professional editors. The proposal reconsidered the editorial difficulties that arise when one aims to constitute a text without neglecting the degree of variability (Cerquiglini 1989, 54, 120: "variance")[4] its different manuscripts incorporate. The claim was that medieval text does not constitute unity in spite of *variance*, but consists of nothing but this *variance*. Accordingly, the new philologists' solution for editorial problems was to drop the goal of establishing a "canonical" version of medieval text altogether, putting emphasis instead on the meaningful *variance* itself, and thus also basing interpretation on inherently unstable text.[5] Many other editorial projects, including the Frankfurt Hölderlin edition and digital endeavors such as the projects united in NINES (www.nines.org) as well as a whole strain of book history have since strengthened and further developed new philology's impulse against the dichotomy of edition and interpretation.[6]

I would like to claim, however, that this impulse is actually part of an undercurrent that has maintained pivotal influence for a long time. Textual criticism has in fact always been driven by scrupulous skepticism against textual stability, and innovative interpretations have always drawn on the unrest provided by this skepticism.[7] The editorial projects of Renaissance humanism already combined new interpretative interests with an enormous effort to reconstitute the texts of antiquity. The "classical" authors of modern philology, from Friedrich Schlegel to Derrida, have founded their work on reconsidering textual details, which resist stabilization – just think of Derrida's scrupulous rereading of formerly neglected details in Rousseau. In this sense, one can – as I shall in this article – reserve the term "philology" for the operation of reconsidering the so-called "material" or object-like basis of text for interpretation.[8] The central accomplishment of philology is the mediation of interpretation and the "objective" givens of actual texts – and thereby the constitution of literary scholarship's precarious disciplinary unity.[9]

This paper's aim is to establish thoroughly the relation of these philological mediations to the culture concept. I propose to relate the difference between textual criticism and interpretation to the more abstract difference between text and communication. The traditional dichotomy has made us think of texts as stable objects and of communication, in contrast, as an ephemeral process; and we usually hold that the philological constitution of text focuses on texts as objects (even if it is attentive to textual *variance*), whilst interpretation opens them to communicative processes. Challenges to this notion, which might help us get closer to philology's power of mediation, put emphasis on the paradoxical status of text between stableness and variance. They can be found, on the one hand, in both the hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer 1984, 54) and post-structuralism (as for example in Barthes's concept of "writable text"; cf. Dembeck 2007a). On the other hand, recent systems' theoretical approaches to communication, transgressing Luhmann's original theory, highlight communication's dependence on proto-textual structures, and thus open it to genuinely philological approaches. This paper follows the second approach, for systems theory enables us to describe textual variance and its significance to the culture concept more precisely than hermeneutics and post-structuralism. Contrary to these movements, it provides insight into the structural *difference* between text and communication, and only thereby lets us see how they are, at the same time, structurally entangled.

Luhmann's original sociological theory describes communication as a recursive process – and not as the "transport" of messages from "sender" to "receiver."[10] He starts out from the observation that the meaning (*Sinn*) of all our utterances in communication is never shaped by our own will and intentions, but only by the responses they provoke.[11] Even those who "receive" a message will not be able to decide what it eventually will have said because their responses will be subject to the same problem – which is why, actually, nobody can ever "receive" and get hold of any message. It is not my partners in communication who determine what I say, but their responses and the responses to their responses, and so forth. The single communicative event is "displaced" in time: It comes into being only after it has occurred – a consequence that puts Luhmann's theory close to Derrida and his notion of *différance* (cf. Luhmann 2001a). Only the very process of responding, which cannot

be effectively controlled by any form of consciousness, determines the communicative status of any utterance whatsoever. Therefore, the communicative process must be considered self-determined – it cannot be controlled by human intentions and is thus decoupled from consciousness. This does not mean that communication proceeds in a completely "chaotic" or "anarchic" manner. It gains stability and continuance by the simple fact that it establishes a recursive interrelation between communicative events: Any utterance enhances its chances to be accepted, repeatedly employed and further developed by future utterances if in turn it relates back to formerly "successful" utterances. Vice versa, evolutionary change is brought into place if new, or at least unusual, utterances prove to be successful despite this fact. Communication, according to Luhmann, is thus the self-governed process of transforming messages which cannot be controlled by any "sender" or "receiver" and achieves its stability as well as its openness (cf. Bunia 2012) for further evolution by ways of recursion – even though it remains to be explained how exactly these recursions come into being.

Obviously, Luhmann's concept of communication thoroughly affects the relation between text and interpretation – interpretation is always a communicative act. But unlike the more than ephemeral events of communication, texts are in fact (also) stable; they consist of perceivably persisting structures. When communication uses texts as its medium it is seemingly deprived of its event character, as Luhmann himself puts it (Luhmann 1986, 631). At the same time texts, if they are used in communication, become subject to communication's temporal restraints. They can only momentarily become part of communicational processes. Just like any other utterance, they need to find a response, a response to the response, and so forth, if they are to achieve communicative significance. Luhmann himself has not developed his concept of textual communication any further. This has been done by both Stanitzek and Baßler, who argue from a philological point of view (although not inspired by "new" philology). They have demonstrated that Luhmann overlooks the general significance of textual communication for his theory (Stanitzek 1996, 23–28; Baßler 2005, 117–126). Since texts, unlike oral utterances, continue to exist after they have been "received," since they are, in this sense, "objects," they can be reread. But writing is not the only medium that provides communication with object-like qualities.

In fact, the moment in which an utterance occurs is *never* identical with the moment in which a response might occur. Something must still be there that can be reconsidered for communicative recursions to take place, whether it be a text or the individual memories of human beings (Stanitzek 1996, 28–35). Any communication thus implies the persistence of something that supports or carries it. In other words, any communication implies something of a textual dimension – a claim that, again, evidently echoes deconstructionist positions. Textuality and communicative recursion are thus nothing but two entangled structural aspects of communication: Recursions cannot occur without a textual basis, and textual structures do not "exist" in the full sense of the word as long as there is no communicative event that relates to them. Of course, the paper and ink of a text in their physical existence do not depend on communication – but no text can be reduced to "its" paper and ink. Rather, textuality engages both communicational recursion and its support in some kind of object.

It remains to be questioned how exactly communication in its complex temporal structure refers to its underlying textual structure and how a text can integrate into communicative processes. This question is pivotal to literary scholarship not only because it affects our concepts of textual criticism, reading and interpretation, but also because a textual (or: philological) description of communication leads us to the culture concept: I suggest that the modern concept of culture acts in response to the problems that occur when one aims to get hold of the complex interrelation between textuality and communication – and thus the miracle of recursive openness and stability. A philology that is self-aware of these problems can provide us with alternative ways of reading culture and make a considerable contribution to the "cultivation" of society.

## *II. Figure and ornament: Constituting the letter*

Communication is always accompanied by a structure of textuality. Our interactions may at times seem to be rather ephemeral and to lack any kind of reliable stableness. But we would not be able to continue communication if it were not for the complex remaining "texture" of interrelated former utterances of ourselves and others. This "texture" seems to guarantee a certain stability in communicational meaning (*Sinn*). This

observation has consequences for the concepts of text and communication. A closer examination of the elements that all texts seem to be made of, namely letters, will help describe the complex relation between textual and communicational structures more accurately (for a different proposal see Baßler 2005, 131–139).

Literary scholarship routinely leaves to specialists of textual criticism the problem that the same letters exist in very different shapes. It usually bases its work on texts that have already been constituted in scholarly editions. Scholarly editors therefore seem to be the only ones professionally concerned with the problem of deciphering, and the developments of the last 40 years, culminating in the discussion on new philology, show that they take their task ever more seriously, thus making us increasingly aware of the highly complex transformations involved in constituting a text. This scrupulous attitude is up to this date not always appreciated. But the fact that we need editors to constitute the letters we refer to shows that we should not take them for granted. Following Luhmann's operational description of communication, I shall analyze what we do when we recognize an object as a letter, that is to say, how we give an object literal meaning and thus constitute it as a letter. This analysis will enable us to demonstrate how reading, also on the level of interpretation, structurally resembles the act of deciphering.

The letter as the elementary textual unit is mainly characterized by its mere iterability; it can be copied without loss. We can discern the letter A as identical, even though it may appear in very different shapes – with serifs or without serifs, in Courier or in Times, in handwriting or in print. Of course we usually perceive these differences, but we can be sure that an A remains an A even if it is transformed into another typeface (cf. McGann 2006, 160–162). On a more abstract level one could say that any time we use characters we differentiate between the character's abstract figure (in the sense of *Gestalt*, not in the rhetorical sense of the word), the shape that makes it distinguishable, and other, purely ornamental features that are attached to it, but that can be ignored as long as one is focusing on the encoded meaning of the text. The form of the letter is thus the difference between its figure and its ornamental parergon.[12] This difference is used before the potential meanings of any text can be focused and even before the difference between signifier and signified can be employed: There would not even be a letter if we could not

determine its figure as it appears within the potential abundance of its ornamental features. However, we can never precisely say what parts of the image that we see are necessary for a characteristic figure to be visible (Hofstadter 1982): We can recognize an A that lacks seemingly essential features, but we can also recognize an A that is buried under a heavy armor of ornamental parerga. In other words, the differentiation between figure and ornament that we easily and repeatedly execute cannot be reduced to a fixed algorithm. It is, however stable, in its core contingent because we cannot foresee with necessity what in future we shall recognize to be or not to be an A, or rather, how in future the figure of A might spring out from ornaments we have not even thought of yet.[13]

In order to see why the difference between figure and ornament is central for the description of textuality and communication, it is useful to compare it to other differences that might come to mind: In describing figure and ornament as the constitutive parts of the letter, one certainly concentrates on signifiers. Eventually, however, this description transgresses the Saussurean difference between signifier and signified. One might assume that once one has established the figure of a signifier, as differing from its ornamental "parergon," one has entered the realm of the signified. However, in what the signifier seems to signify, one will have to look for what is actually significant and thus differentiate once more between significant figures and the ornaments attached to them, and so forth. The difference between figure and ornament must also not be confused with the difference between type and token. According to Peirce, types and tokens are mutually dependent, since a type has to be embodied within tokens, and tokens are in turn "determine[d]" by "their" type. As a third term, Peirce introduces "Tone," an "indefinite significant character such as a tone of a voice" (Peirce 1933, 537). Even though the concept of "tone" has been largely ignored in further theoretical developments, it could have helped to uncover a decisive problem. Whereas the philosophical discussion usually concentrates on the problem of how a type exerts its determining power over "its" tokens, the concept of tone raises the question of how tokens can gain recognizability first of all – how can they be more then just tone? My concept of figure and ornament starts out from this problem. The difference between figure and ornament is furthermore linked to the difference between "figure and ground" as developed by *Gestalt* psychology and

phenomenology,[14] because the difference between figure and ornament can only be constituted against a "ground" already neglected. The difference between figure and ornament is the effect of a re-entry (see Luhmann 1993) of the difference between figure and ground on the side of the figure: Within phenomena that seem to be distinctly defined, such as a figure on a ground, one must always differentiate once more between significant and recognizable details (figures in the sense that I have given the word) and pure ornament. This makes the distinction between figure and ornament much more unstable – and open for evolutionary change. The concept most closely related to the difference of figure and ornament is the difference between digital and analog (Wilden 1980, 169–170). If digital code is defined by the fact that it can be copied without a loss, then one might say that in the figure we grasp the letter as part of a digital code whereas the ornament is left in an analog state. The difference between figure and ornament is thus important for a theoretically advanced description of textuality and communication, because it makes us understand how digital text may dynamically emerge from objects such as printed paper, computer screens, and so forth.[15]

As Lotman has shown – although in a different terminology and within a different theoretical setting – the difference between digital figure and ornamental parergon does not only occur on the level on which letters are defined. Reading is bound to it on every linguistic level. It always has to determine what it treats as significant and what it excludes from its observations, leaving it in its purely ornamental state. A syntactical analysis of a text will not consider its paragraph structure; the reconstruction of a storyline will ignore the respective text's paratextual shape; and the metric qualities of a sonnet may be observed while neglecting its many assonances. Of course, one is always free to include in one's configuration of the text what otherwise might have been excluded (cf. Lotman 1993, 92–121). But as Hirsch has shown in the framework of his objective hermeneutics, the pure necessity of putting emphases on *something* in order to come to an understanding always bears the potential of producing irreconcilable contradictions in the text (see his critical account of "inclusivism" in Hirsch 1967, 227–230). Hirsch's goal is to provide a strategy to decide which emphasis can objectively be justified and which readings thus correspond to the true "meaning" (*Sinn* in the sense of Frege, as Hirsch claims) of a text – as distinguished from its mere "significance"

(*Bedeutung*), its more or less contingent further connotations. But Lotman, although ignorant of Hirsch's approach, makes it very clear that such a reading, on any level, would fail to grasp the text in its object-like quality. Its selections always remain contingent, however stable they are. Therefore, the text as a whole, as an object-like substrate of reading, remains impenetrable (Lotman 1993, 121). We always try to find, in Mukarovsky's terms, an "intentional" arrangement in the text. But the text's existence as an object guarantees that it will also incorporate "unintentional," contingent facets that yet need to be included – thus once more enforcing the search for intentionality (Mukarovsky 1977, 36, 45, 59, 64–65). It is thus precisely the existence of the text as an object that at one and the same time promises and up to a certain degree also guarantees the stability of textual meaning and forces us to decide contingently how to emphasize the text in order to get hold of it. Due to its object-like qualities, any text is always both stable and open to alternative figurations of its meaning (Lotman 1993, 83–84).

Both Lotman and Mukarovsky restrict most of their argument to literary texts, or at least to art. But it is easy to broaden their perspective and relate Lotman's cybernetic theory of the literary text to the more general claim that a moment of textuality inheres in any communication. Lotman begins with the classical distinction between signal and noise, as formulated by Shannon and Weaver in their mathematical theory of communication. Although this theory, at least in its first outlines, describes communication as transport and thus substantially differs from my presuppositions, I would like to claim – thereby closing the list of relatives – that the difference between signal and noise is linked to the difference between figure and ornament. Shannon and Weaver show that signal and noise are equivalent insofar as noise only adds information to the information the signal conveys. Just as any meaningful figure must be distilled from the ornamental abundance of information within which it appears, the signal or "desirable uncertainty" (that is: information) inhibiting a message must be differentiated from its "undesirable uncertainty," its noise (Shannon & Weaver 1978, 18–22). Both noise and the ornamental dimension of characters and texts thus refer to the undifferentiated and indistinct dimension of communicative substrates, to the haze that must be present in order to contrast figurative meaning. But Shannon and Weaver describe communication as a process and therefore

define signal and noise only in their processual nature. My concept of "ornament" also takes into account that these processes rely on proto-textual structures: *Any* "receptive" operation – of a text, of an oral utterance, of a television broadcast – is bound to make some difference between figure and ornament and *thereby creates* an object-like, textual residuum that accompanies the communicative process and provides it with the potential for dynamic "rereadings."

Philologists obviously care for this object-like dimension of communication; they want it to become present to communication.[16] Certainly, the assumed dignity of specific texts has enhanced the development of this scrupulous skepticism in the past and renders the methods derived from it valuable also for today's scholars.[17] One might even claim that philology is somewhat constituted by the bias between its aim for "scientific" neutrality towards its objects and the justification of its scrupulous approach in their esthetic (or other) appreciation.[18] However, the insight that one might never and at no linguistic level know in advance which of the seemingly purely ornamental features of a text will in future be included and for its never-ending editorial efforts. "New" philology may thus be described as the attempt to widen radically the focus of what might be the figural basis of the interpretation of medieval text. Its aim, to provide more ornament in order to find out if there are more figures in it, is based on arguments about the specific medial situation of the middle ages in contrast with the present. The general theory of textuality and communication as developed in this article gives new philology's aim a broader basis: It is the contingence of any difference between figure and ornament that justifies the skeptical and never-ending philological effort of new philology and its relatives in the editorial practice of modern literary texts. Only by relating to and cultivating the "material" basis of text is one able to establish stability of meaning, but precisely this recursion to the "material" basis once more opens it up to further questioning.

### *III. Reading culture*

Despite the prevailing division of labor between the constitution and the interpretation of text, literary scholarship has inherited much of philology's skepticism. It has in fact never totally delegated the care of the letter to scholarly edition alone, and there have always been philologists

in the sense I have given the word – scholars who use the reconsideration of the object-like basis of text as a starting point for its interpretation. It is therefore interesting to see in which areas a philological approach has had an especially strong impact in recent years. For it seems that philological attention to the irritating power of texts as objects has been particularly vivid in studies concerned with culture.

Movements like New Historicism, but also cultural studies in general, found their way into the archives and turned their attention to an alternative dimension of textual objects long ago. To read different texts and to read them differently, reversing established patterns of emphasis, has been characteristic for studies in postcolonialism, popular culture, and gender alike. This shift of attention can be considered philologically motivated, as it implies alternative ways to differentiate meaningful figurations. But only if these readings incorporate the textual, quasi-objective support itself do they become philological in the strict sense of the word. Many recent studies, often combining an interest in culture with an interest in media, have done exactly this: Film studies, for example, have taught us that for a long time the choice of filming material latently followed racist presuppositions – by allowing only light skin colors to be represented in high quality (Dyer 1997, 82–144). Art history, for example, has turned our attention to the carnivalesque marginal drawings of late medieval manuscripts and thereby made us aware of social mechanisms at once subversive to and affirmative of the suppressive morals of traditional culture as expressed in the seemingly main text of the manuscripts (Camille 1992). And literary scholarship itself has shown how manifold (and often very "material") mediations of (textual) critics could subject a protean corpus of writing such as Emily Dickinson's papers to the ideology of (lyrical) subjectivity (Jackson 2005). In philological readings like these, seemingly ornamental (or "technical") details gain figural meaning and trigger new understandings of (historical) culture.

What makes philological techniques applicable to culture is the fact that culture must be defined with regard to the textual support of communication. Consider, for example, the way we observe cultural difference: As Baecker points out, the term "culture" was coined in the eighteenth century as the consequence of a new practice of comparison (Baecker 2001b, 46–50; cf. Luhmann 1995, Nassehi 2003). One started to confront social practices and phenomena with different and deviating

practices and phenomena – thus highlighting their contingency. Undeniable truths could thus be declared to be historically, socially, or regionally – in a word: "culturally" – specific. Since then, as I would like to add to Baecker's description, cultural comparison has been concerned with how differently figurations may be considered as meaningful in communication – be it by different peoples, classes, institution, and so on.

Think, for example, of table manners, a classical field of cultural comparison. Evidently, communication at table does not only consist of toasts and the general conversation, but includes many other, seemingly "ornamental" aspects. To observe or not to observe certain rules of behavior, for example, may be a statement or testify cultural difference. Independently from our theory of communication and textuality, it has been demonstrated that our making sense of a person's behavior, just as any other communication, involves quasi-textual structures: Some social scientists would call the set of rules that one follows at the table a script,[19] and Geertz has shown – in elaborating on Ryle's famous description of a winking boy – that any interpretation of a behavioral detail must relate to a "texture" of yet established meanings (Geertz 1973, 5–10). It will soon become obvious that Geertz has gone too far in identifying the "webs of significance" (p. 5), within which human behavior is entangled, with culture. But he is right in claiming that the cultural description of a field such as table manners will have to integrate a concept of textuality. Anyone's actual performance at the table incorporates a vast number of details. For any of these details to become communicatively relevant or even distinguishable, it needs to be related to "records" of other communicative events that exist in the individual memories of the persons present – and may have been internalized in family traditions, codified in manuals, or taught in etiquette and manners courses. To cut or not to cut potatoes, to handle knife and fork European- or American-style, to clink or not to clink glasses – all this can become part of the communication taking place at the table if it becomes related to this "texture" or "script" – to the textual support of communication. It than takes on figural meaning and does not remain in its "original" purely ornamental state.

Table manners are subject to cultural comparison simply because the difference between their figural and ornamental features can be made in very different ways. Both within the actual performance of the particular eater and within the textual support it is related to, one has to

distinguish which details are part of some script's figural dimension and which are ornamental. I may or may not continue to observe the rule not to cut potatoes by knife, even though hardly any blade is still made of silver, which would run the danger of oxidizing when in touch with the potato (cf. Stanitzek 1996, 32–33). If I continue to observe it, this may go by unnoticed, or it may lead to my being judged to be either specifically cultivated or particularly pedantic. Whether there is a judgment at all depends on whether my action is related to some textual support, for example, in the individual memories of the participants, and both judgments will be constituted with regard to this support – which, at the same time, they would be capable of changing. Cultural comparison always proceeds considering some textual support of communication, and culture is thus closely tied to communication's textual dimension.

How can this "tie" be described more thoroughly? I have already stated that I do not follow Geertz's equation of culture with the semantic texture a society uses to make sense of people's behavior. This equation is not precise because the process of cultivating or changing this texture is evidently also part of culture. The theory of communication and textuality as proposed in this paper provides a more precise approach in that it highlights the contrast between communication and textuality as well as their interrelation: The self-determined process of communication, consisting of nothing but a chain of seemingly ephemeral events, depends on a form of textuality it can never fully access. To the decoupling of communication from consciousness thus corresponds a "decoupling" of communication from textuality. Neither are the figures communication uses and the ornaments it neglects determinable from the "material" features of its textual basis only (as, for example, the distribution of black and white dots on a computer screen), nor can any feature of textuality strictly enforce any specific communicative figuration. Still, the structural link between the two obviously also grants a surprising stability of the textual figures in communicational use. Descriptions of the many mechanisms that allow for this slightly paradoxical interrelation between communication and its textual substrate are far from being well established – and maybe one should not even hope to find a thorough description of them. However, Western thought has at least found a designation for them: culture.

One may reasonably ask, if the rather dispersed meanings of the term actually sum up to a concept.[20] The explanation for our uneasiness with giving it one proper meaning is that it was coined to cover a complex and inherently paradoxical structure. The interrelation between communication and its textual basis must be put into at least two contradictory and still inseparable perspectives which correspond to the two most common approaches to culture: the concept of culture as a set of norms and rules that somehow govern communication; and the concept of culture as a pool (or archive) of alternatives to the manifest structures of society.[21] The first approach aims at explaining the stability of social processes and relations. Typically, its descriptions of culture take the form of a list naming all the factors, which seem to determine individual instances of social behavior. Tylor provided the most prominent description of this kind in 1871 (Tylor 1958, 1). The individuals thus subjected to the norms of culture at the same time embody them, and these norms would not come into being without becoming embodied by individuals. Therefore, theories of this kind tend to build upon an anthropological (or at least psychological) foundation (see, prominently, Malinowski 2002, 36–37). The same holds for many traditional theories of *Kulturkritik* from Rousseau over Freud to Horkheimer and Adorno which see individual needs and cultural norms entangled in an unceasing conflict – thereby aiming at liberating the subject in the name of an alternative, higher form of culture. At this point, approaches of the first kind become similar to approaches of the second kind, which hold culture to be a pool of alternatives to existing social structures. According to these descriptions, societies by ways of culture enclose within themselves alternatives to themselves – an argument that finds its basis in Bateson's concept of "schismogenesis" (Bateson 1935). Some representatives of a semiotics of culture have carried this point further, as for example Lotman, who argues that a necessary function of culture is the "production of indetermination" (Lotman 1974, 418: "Erzeugung von Unbestimmtheit"; cf. the concept of "semiosphere" in Lotman 2010, 163–202). Culture thus appears to be an archive that is open to new readings rather than a program governing social processes. It is not surprising that many current descriptions of culture (and partly also Geertz's older concept of culture as an "acted document"; Geertz 1973, 10), try to reconcile both approaches. Such a reconciliation, however, can never be thoroughly

developed because the two aspects of culture are at the same time mutually exclusive and mutually dependent. The stability culture provides comes at the price of being based upon contingent operations, whereas the evolutionary openness of culture in the long run also contributes to communicative stability – an argument that has at least partly been made by Lotman, even though he still lacks the theoretical means to precisely differentiate between text and communication. This differentiation, however, is the key to a thorough understanding of culture's twofold appearance.

On the one hand, culture guarantees stability. It provides communication with ways to differentiate between meaningful figures and excluded ornaments – not only on the level of constituting letters or sounds, but also on all other levels of communication. Since communication depends on this service, culture appears as the mechanism that defines the norms and rules of a society. There may be societies in which the way of wrapping up a present is highly codified and loaded with figural significance, although someone foreign to this set of rules may consider the wrapping as a purely ornamental detail. Or there may be situations where one has to pay special attention to the specific medium used to transmit a message. There still is a difference between a hand- or a typewritten love letter, although the preference for handwriting (or even for the love letter as such) is definitely declining. In this perspective, culture is considered the characteristic basis of different societies or epochs, something that seemingly grants them identity. As long as communication does not make use of its (rather new) potential for cultural comparison, the specific meaningful figures offered by the "own" culture seem to be the unquestionable foundation of social life. From the viewpoint of a sociological theory of communication, all these rules come about as consequences of communicative self-organization. This process might also have had a very different outcome, since any differentiation between figural and ornamental features of communication's textual support is, at its basis, contingent. But the fact that communicative recursion always has a stabilizing effect, also stabilizes the rules that govern these differentiations. Although built upon contingent operations, culture as the bundle of mechanisms linking communication to its textual basis thus indeed enhances the development of rule-driven processes. Without this accomplishment, there would be no communicative stability at all.

On the other hand, culture also always confronts communication with alternative differentiations between figures and the ornaments inherent to its textual basis. As Baecker writes, though arguing from a different perspective, culture is "an accompanying observation" (Baecker 2001b, 9: "eine mitlaufende Beobachtung") through which a potential to configure the world differently becomes part of any communication. After all, the continuation of communication depends on contingent selections from somewhat stable material, which, like any text, is always open to alternative readings. There is, however, never a means to make sure that the figures selected by communication remain identical. Since communication's textual basis is in a certain way independent from communication, it may appear to be its "archive" – the last resort for ornamental features of former communication that have never been used. One reason for the abundance of this archive certainly is the fact that communication's textual basis is extremely dispersed: It is contained in billions of individuals, texts, records, and electronic traces. Communication's self-determined selections give only some of the potential figurations inherent in this dispersion a chance. However, the abundance of cultural alternatives is functional in that it ensures society's capability to adapt to new situations by relating to so far unemployed or yet unthought of figurations of meaning in order to develop new norms. Culture thus also provides us with the capacity to break with seemingly necessary rules and to render them contingent once more – with the paradoxical effect that in most cases this will yet again lead to rather stable new rules.

Both perspectives on culture cannot be separated; they are, as I have said, mutually dependent: Culture incorporates mechanisms, which – on the basis of communicative recursion – provide contingent, but stable rules on how to differentiate figures from ornaments. This very operation, however, depends on a diverse and divergent textual basis that always also allows for different differentiations. The mere possibility of making use of these alternatives renders culture a medium of evolutionary change. By interrelating the communicative process with its diverse and ever changing textual basis, culture provides for both stability and evolutionary openness. As a consequence, what we call "cultural identities" are only the effects of contingent differentiations – they mark, in fact, differences between different ways to differentiate between figures and ornaments. Culture tends to stabilize these identities, but its

openness for evolution at the same time always makes them subject to potential further differentiation or deformation.[22]

To define culture as the mere *name* for the loose bundle of mechanisms that provide links between the communicative process and its textual residuum does not only explain cultural theory's schism into norm- and archive-centered approaches. It also helps to account more precisely for various other ways in which we employ the term. It might, for example, seem surprising that modern societies of the West, in the name of culture, attach such great significance to objects.[23] This attachment may be easily explained in the case of objects that have come to bear quasi-religious meaning, such as the Liberty Bell, but not necessarily when one considers expensive programs to restore otherwise insignificant buildings from whatever historical period. The foundation of such efforts evidently lies in the belief that these objects somehow bear a considerable amount of irreplaceable "original" traces of potentially insurmountable richness of meaning. Even though this belief may very easily be deconstructed, the fact that we hold objects to be culturally valuable is eventually and rightly founded in the insight that the objects of communication will always bear a (as yet ornamental) surplus of significance yet to be configured. This feature makes objects ideal symbols of otherwise questionable so-called "cultural identities." They give those who perceive their cultural identity expressed by, or contained in, such an object the opportunity to distinguish themselves from those who cannot "read" this specific object's specific meaning. But also the persistent concept of a universal culture of humanity, which the "real" cultures ever fail to comprehend fully, can be explained in the framework of a philological theory of culture. As culture is irreducible to any defined set and thus always bears alternative possibilities to configure ornament, it is always possible to devaluate concrete cultural phenomena as just particular – thus negatively pointing to a "universal" level of a culture, even when leaving it to speculation how it could ever be grasped.[24]

Finally, the concept of culture presented here enables us to understand why we can, convincingly, both hold everything in society to be culturally determined, and, in our everyday usage, reserve the term "culture" to specific areas of communication. In principle, as we have seen, the functioning of cultural mechanisms is a necessary precondition for communicative recursion. However, these mechanisms, in different communicative

contexts, are more or less strictly conditioned and thus allow for more or less variance. Therefore, we quite rightly hold different areas of communication to be culturally determined in very different degrees: Art, for example, derives its fascination from the fact that it specializes in making ornaments take on figural meaning and dissolving seemingly stable figures into mere ornaments.[25] Ambiguous patterns, plays on the attention of the recipient, reverses of traditional ways of making sense of the world – all these maneuvers can be found in abundance in (at least modern) literature, visual arts, and music, and all of them make use of the utter contingency of our ways of "reading culture." It is thus not accidental that Lotman's and Mukarovsky's accounts of the ornamental abundance of text start out from an analysis of the literary text and the work of art as a "material" object. And the difference between figure and ornament itself has not accidentally first been developed in a description of art. Other areas of our social life we hold to be non-cultural or at least only very weakly influenced by cultural factors. In these areas, communicative conditioning is at times so strong as not to allow for ornamental deviations. It has been argued that mathematics may be described as a form of communication capable of refraining from any contingent differentiation between figure and ornament (Bunia 2008, 213). Many sciences try to operate so as to exclude the possibility of alternative figuration of its textual basis as far as possible. Also in the field of economy, cultural contingence is favorably neglected – but must at times be called into memory, for example by sending managers to seminars on "intercultural communication" to make them appear more "cultivated" in situations foreign to them. Culture in the universal sense of "cultivatedness" (cf. Hamacher 1997) is thus nothing but the ability, formerly claimed by the aristocracy, always to know the rules – but also to realize when it is necessary to deviate from them. A "cultivated" person is characterized by his or her ability to adapt his or her mode of differentiating figural meaning to new situations.

### *IV. Philology and culture*

The claim that culture is the name for all mechanisms interrelating communication with its textual basis certainly provides an explanation for literary scholarships and other text-based disciplines' preoccupation with it. What benefit, however, might literary scholarship gain from this

insight? And what may be the specific service that a professionalized philology offers to society?

First, the thorough development of the theory of communication, text, and culture as proposed in this article helps the discipline to achieve new forms of modesty and self-consciousness at the same time. The insight into the fact that every reading depends on differentiations between some figure and some ornament that are as much contingent as they are rule-driven will trigger a more precise way of developing other fields of literary theory. Being notoriously blamed for its lack of precision, literary scholarship would benefit from the confession that on the one hand its own operations in principle do not differ from those of any other kind of reading. For this confession on the other hand provides the opportunity to develop a more thorough account of how philological reading, because of to its respect for the material substrate of text, has developed highly reliable and stable methods. We should learn to accept that the disciplinary unity of literary scholarship is self-contradictory: In each of its operations it relates to structures it treats as stable, at the same time counting on the fact that, on every level, these structures are actually – not only in the sense of the concept of *variance* – also highly variable. In this self-contradiction, one can once more trace the difference between constituting and interpreting text – and between culture as a set of rules and culture as an archive of alternative figurations. However, it now becomes obvious that *both* textual criticism and interpretation are themselves subject to the ambivalence thus characterized: Textual criticism constitutes stable texts, at the same time casting doubt on their fixed status, whereas interpretation relates to stable texts, at the same time rendering them dynamic by its reading. Literary scholarship can gain its specific form of precision only by ways of a continuous reflection upon this ambivalence: Rather than through the ever more detailed account of textual ornament, which is nevertheless necessary, it is through cultivating disciplinary self-reflexivity (including "theory"[26]) and through gaining a clear perspective on the status and scope of its results that literary scholarship can compete with the so-called "hard" sciences.

Second, we will have to maintain the basic philological operations if we want to accommodate the complex structure of culture in its stability as well as its openness to evolutionary change. The above-mentioned recent tendency of literary scholarship and cultural studies to focus

medial and "material" contexts of communication implicitly follows a philological ethic. But still, the division of labor between textual criticism and interpretation prevails, and it is deepened by a tendency to neglect the formal and linguistic qualities of text – the study of meter and lexical peculiarities is not commonly the focus of culturally-interested approaches. A philological engagement with culture must care for these dimensions of text without falling into aestheticist ideology or formalist positivism. It must pay close attention to the contingent operations, which constitute textuality and develop a thoroughly operational perspective on the interrelation of text and communication – repeatedly suspending the act of interpretation and falling back into the pedantry of a philological access to the texts and wondering about seemingly ornamental details. It is an important insight that cultural studies, in order to be successful, need philology's attention to what is fixed in texts – just as the philological care for literature and other texts needs culture as the mechanism that dynamically supplies it with ornaments to read. This mutual dependence once more reflects culture's paradoxical status as both a guarantee of rule-driven stableness and a stimulator of archival variance.

Third, the preoccupation with ornaments turned into figures (and vice versa) links both philology and cultural studies to art and literature. It is characteristic of artworks and literary texts – no matter how canonical they are – that they challenge the reader to find figural meaning in their seemingly ornamental dimensions. Works of art, at least since the emergence of "autonomous art," exploit the contingency of any differentiation between figure and ornament and prefer it to the stabilizing effects of communicative recurrence. The mechanism of turning ornament into figure and vice versa is precisely what gives art its (precarious) stability. The sequence of modernity's avant-gardes up to the playfulness of so called postmodernism re-enacts this mechanism over and over again. This makes (literary) works of art a particularly promising object of study both for anyone interested in the development of culture and for anyone devoted to the philological constitution and interpretation of text.

This last observation, however, also gives way to a question that might seem a threat to philologically-based academic disciplines: If art is akin to these disciplines, and if art already specializes in the transformation of

ornaments into figures, thus enhancing cultural evolution, why then do we also need academic disciplines devoted to more or less the same task? At first sight, the theory of communication, textuality, and culture, as proposed in this paper, may indeed lead to the conclusion that philology is nothing but a discipline of art. But art and philology differ in the way they stabilize their own evolution. Art explicitly prefers the exposition of contingency to the development of stability. It can only go on if it finds new and surprising ways to irritate established differentiations between figures and ornaments – although, of course, it could not do without stabilizing recurrences, either. Philology, since it is not only related to art, but also to scholarship, explicitly aims at establishing stable descriptions of contingent developments in the relation between communication and textuality – although, of course, it is bound to the insight that its descriptions are themselves only stable thanks to communicative recursions. Philology's preference for stable descriptions may explain its preference for historical objects (Stanitzek 2000) – as art's preference for contingent changes enhances an explicitly selective way of dealing with the past. In its quest for stable descriptions, philology has developed an elaborate system of conditions to render them valid: editorial norms, the framework of literary, social, and cultural history, theories of textuality, literature, communication, and culture, and finally the very influential traditions of interpreting its favorite texts. Apparently, only the scrupulous and time-consuming collection of material and data allows the sustainable establishment of figural aspects in the seemingly ornamental parts of text.

As art constantly triggers culture's – and its own – openness to evolutionary change, philology observes this process, but in its own operations prefers stability. If art gives society the ability to observe its structures and operations in their contingent foundation, philology helps it to consolidate these insights once more into stable structures. Philology's social and cultural responsibility is not only to direct attention to the mere contingency of cultural and social structures as well as to the ideological restrictions it nevertheless contains, but also to explain the mechanisms that maintain these structures. Its effectiveness depends on its methods to validate its descriptions as more reliable (but therefore also less surprising) than those of art. If it does so convincingly, it might also more reliably contribute to keeping cultural memory open to potential new

readings that find figural qualities in formerly seemingly ornamental dimensions. In order to meet this demand, we must place the ornamental side of textuality at the center of our attention, even beyond the single alphabetical character, and at the same time maintain the scrupulous and deeply skeptical attitude characteristic of philology's tradition. A philology of culture, as proposed by this paper, is in its essence nothing but the restless and scrupulous reading of ornament. It is not the least of its achievements that it gives us the chance to avoid the pitfalls of all the one-sided concepts of culture – and a means to confront irresponsible uses or even abuses of the term as cited at the very beginning of this paper.

## NOTES

1. Terminological note: In this article, I prefer the term "literary scholarship" to both "literary criticism" and "*Literaturwissenschaft*." As defined in section I, the term "philology" takes the German discussion of the concept into account; therefore its meaning slightly differs from its common use in English-language scholarship.
2. All translations are the author's own.
3. The founding father of the modern hermeneutic tradition, Schleiermacher, started out with the difference between textual criticism ("Kritik") and interpretation ("Hermeneutik") and held the two to be mutually dependent (Schleiermacher 1995, 69–70).
4. Cerquiglini's concept radicalizes Zumthor's notion of medieval literature's *mouvance* (Zumthor 1972, 507).
5. See Nichols 1990 as well as the other articles in that volume of *Speculum*. Nicolas later introduced the term "material" philology (Nichols 1997). The movement does not have much in common with most of the various calls for a "return to philology" in recent decades, such as de Man's polemical argument about his very own method of close reading (de Man 1986) or Said's philological defense of humanism (Said 2004). A genuinely "new philological" call for a return to philology can be found in Patterson 1994; for recent initiatives see Gumbrecht 2003, Hamacher 2009, and Pollock 2009.
6. See also developments in book history, as for example advanced by McKenzie 1986, McGann 1991, and in a rather recent issue of *PMLA* (see, among others, Price 2006).
7. The question, how philology can turn its skepticism into a productive tool, has recently found fresh interest; see Benne 2009, and the essays in Bremer et al. 2010.
8. Cf. Gumbrecht's and Hamacher's accounts of philology (Gumbrecht 2003, Hamacher 2009). Both follow a much less "technical" approach, but start out from partly similar presupposition; see especially Hamacher 2009, theses 57, 58, 76.
9. The manifestations of this mediation – and therefore the outline of philology's disciplinary unity – are, of course, themselves subject to historical change. For the

context of my argument, it is sufficient to state that the opposition between variance and stability of text and interpretation is constitutive for *all* these manifestations.

10. For an implicit deconstruction of the sender–receiver model, see Lotman 2010, 19–52.
11. "Ob ich meine, was ich sage, weiß ich nicht. Und wenn ich es wüßte, müßte ich es für mich behalten," Luhmann writes in a famous article (Luhmann 2001b, 132: "Whether I mean what I say I do not know. And if I knew it, I would have to keep it for myself."). For a broader prospect of Luhmann's theory of communication see Luhmann 1996 and Luhmann 1997.
12. See Dembeck 2007b, 413–423; more precisely Bunia 2008; for the concept of "parergon" see Kant 1996, 142 [B 43], and Derrida 1978, 44–135.
13. Up to this date, computers have not "learned" to read the way human beings can. Web services implement a simple test to ban internet bots (programs that perform automated tasks on the internet) from their services: they show some distorted letters to users who want to create, for example, an email account, since only humans can successfully decipher them.
14. For the original idea see Rubin 2001. The concept has been applied to phenomenology, most prominently in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Husserl stresses that any actual perception is made against a "Hof von Hintergrundsanschauungen" (Husserl 1913, 61–64, here p. 62: a "field of background images"), and from the difference between figure and ground he derives the difference between actuality and potentiality. See also Merleau-Ponty 1945, 9–19.
15. Bunia even argues that the possibility to differentiate and to combine analog and digital encoding is the precondition of any complex cultural evolution (Bunia 2012, 15–16).
16. This desire has something in common with the evocation of "presence" that Gumbrecht claims to be the core of all philological efforts: What philology evokes is the presence of textual features which, as pure ornaments, might otherwise seem to be absent (Gumbrecht 2003). With regard to philology's relation to the language of desire and language cf. Hamacher 2009.
17. See Wegmann 2000 for a short characteristic of philology's aesthetic foundations.
18. The history of literary criticism has always been determined by such dichotomies, among which the dichotomy between "scientific" and aesthetic approaches and the dichotomy between "scientific" and pedagogical demands are the most prominent (cf. Wegmann 1994).
19. For the original concept of cognition theory see Abelson 1976, 33: A script is "a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as the observer." See also Schank & Abelson 1977.
20. For a classical overview, see Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952; more recently Baecker 2001a.
21. These two concepts echo the fact that "culture" negates both the natural determinateness of human behavior and its full autonomy (cf. Eagleton 2000, 4–5).
22. It is important to see that this description of "cultural identity" avoids the conventional dialectics of "self" and "other" which suggests that the "self" can only be constituted in its difference from the "other." Cultural identity is instead

defined as the result of a second order observation: One notices that differences between figures and ornaments can also be made differently and takes this different mode of differentiation as characteristic of a different cultural identity. Any such observation, of course, immediately changes the "own" and potentially also the "other" mode of differentiation, thus at the same time drawing and blurring a boundary. Authors such as Bhabha are therefore right in putting concepts such as "hybridity" or "in-between-ness" at the center of their theory (Bhabha 2000, 139–170). For questions of cultural identity see also Baecker 2001b, 50–53, 104–111, and Dembeck 2010.

23. Cf. Malinowski's claim that there cannot be a dysfunctional cultural object (Malinowski 2002, 27–29).
24. For a striking account of this concept and its inherent ambivalences, contradictions, and problems, see Hamacher 1997.
25. For an elaborated account of this theses, based on Lotman's theory of the literary text and Luhmann's description of modern art, see Dembeck 2007b, 424–437.
26. Cf. Benne 2009, 209: "Die sogenannte Rephilologisierung der philologischen Fächer tut der Philologie keinen Gefallen, wenn sie um der Gemütsruhe willen aus 'der Theorie' sich zurückzieht" ("The so-called 're-philologization' of the philological disciplines will not do philology a favor if it gives up 'theory' for the sake of its peace of mind.").

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Till Dembeck (till.dembeck@uni.lu) is currently *collaborateur scientifique* at the University of Luxembourg where he is working on a research project devoted to multilingual contemporary literature. He studied Germanics, mathematics, and philosophy at the University of Bonn, at the University of Washington, Seattle, and at the University of Freiburg, attended the Graduiertenkolleg "Klassizismus und Romantik" of the German Research Society (DFG) at the University of Gießen, and received his PhD from the University of Siegen in 2007 with a dissertation on paratextual framing in Gottsched, Sterne, Wieland, Moritz, and Jean Paul. Subsequently, he worked as *wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter* at the University of Mainz and was director of the Information Center of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Riga, Latvia. His academic interests include German literature from the eighteenth century to the present, text, communications and culture theory, lyric poetry, and the history of linguistics. He has co-edited two books on the (social) history of German literature and published articles on Lessing, Herder, Fichte, Novalis, F. Schlegel, Brentano, A. von Arnim, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Heine, and Nietzsche, on questions of literary theory and philological ethics, and on the semantics of phonography around 1900.