



Cultural Intermediation and Civil Society: Towards a Hermeneutically Strong Conception

Cultural Sociology
1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/17499755241228891

journals.sagepub.com/home/cus**Marcel Knöchelmann** 

Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, USA

Abstract

Literary fiction narrates ethical and moral meaning. It is rich with ethical conceptions of the good life and expressions of moral universalism, and it assumes a meaningful role in civil society through this richness. And yet, existing conceptions of cultural intermediation do not consider this richness; they are reductive in the way they focus on the social-structural space in between author and reader. Cultural intermediation is trimmed down to competition and generalizations of taste and aesthetic acclaim without considering cultural meaningfulness. In this article, I propose and discuss a new conception of cultural intermediation that builds a bridge between understanding the production and reception of literature in social-structural terms and society's civil discourse. I draw on a diverse set of authors from philosophy and cultural sociology – discourse ethics and civil sphere theory in particular – to form a critique of intermediation. I conceptualize what it means to claim that literary text is a morally meaningful medium in three different ways: productive intermediation, receptive intermediation and critical intermediation. And I highlight that literary fiction is not culture per se, but that it enables actors to mediate culture. From authors along with agents, publishers, distributors and critics towards readers, literary text is embedded in culture-specific context. This is a hermeneutically strong conception of cultural intermediation that contributes to a meaning-centred sociology of literature.

Keywords

aesthetic transformation, civil sphere theory, cultural intermediation, discourse ethics, literary criticism, literary fiction, morality, publishing, sociology of literature

Introduction: Literature in Society

Literary fiction narrates ethical and moral meaning. It is rich with ethical conceptions of the good life and notions of moral universalism, and it assumes a critical role in society through this richness. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* contributed to fighting for the abolition of

Corresponding author:

Marcel Knöchelmann, Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University, 204 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06520, USA.

Email: marcel.knoechelmann@yale.edu

slavery in the USA. Charles Dickens' novels prepared a public to comprehend the cruelties capitalist society inflicts on children. A wealth of autobiographical works – from Kertész's *Fatelessness* to Spiegelman's *Maus* – enable readers to understand dictatorship and the Holocaust. These works exemplify how aesthetic experience contributes to the discourse of civil society (Alexander, 2006: 75).

This concerns not only positive, but also negative authorship, as well as the ambiguity in between. Deviant authorship showcases the moral impact literature can assume in society, an impact that is beyond social hierarchization and aesthetic acclaim. Jünger's *Storm of Steel* – so vastly studied philologically – had a tremendous impact on ontologically-affirming war experience in pre-Nazi Germany. His later work *On the Marble Cliffs* instead represented a highly aestheticized moral call to action against dictatorship. This author and his readers are cultural intermediaries par excellence by way of highlighting how literary text fares as an initiator, rather than as a product, of cultural diffusion, crystallization, and strengthening. Just as literary fiction can enable civil society to aim for civil repair, deviant authorship can produce narratives enticing civil backlash. Literary text is not just a philological entity here; it is a key sociological one.

Philosophy does not tire of talking about the importance of the aesthetic for culture and society (Henrich, 2016), as a means of liberation (Bertram, 2018), creative imagination (Menke, 2013), or alterity in criticism (Docherty, 2006). Literary fiction allows ordinary individuals to gain social knowledge, to be confronted with otherness, and to recognize some previously unknown aspect of being that is essential for considering the constitution of society (Felski, 2008). It has the 'capacity to make things present (*Vergegenwärtigungsleistung*)' (Gabriel, 2019: 18). Social solidarity cannot gain grounds without otherness being heard. This does not necessarily take the form of grand narratives. Ordinary readers do not all engage in the hermeneutic depths of close reading, enabling a divine narrator to reveal hidden moral claims. Still, critical discourse constantly draws on literature and filters its symbolic forms into everyday language. In the words of Dromi and Illouz, the novel serves 'as part and parcel of the formation of civil society' (2010: 353). Moreover, we can find that the seemingly mundane act of reading trivial novels has real-life consequences and may assume the form of solitary protest against masculine dominance, as the progressive feminist study of Radway outlines (1991). More than 200 years ago, Schiller had already concluded that a key task for civil society is to expose its individuals to aesthetic forms (Schiller, 2000: 23). Or, as Taylor says, in reception of literary text, 'seeing good empowers' and becomes 'a moral source' (Taylor, 1989: 454).

Contrary to such theorizations and to the empirical reality of the production and reception of literature, sociology – and many conceptions of the sociology of culture in particular – treats literary fiction and its production predominantly materialistically. Central to such treatments is the claim that literature is an object or product; consequently, the means of production, cultural capital, and aesthetic acclaim are the issues to be looked at, superficially boiling down to cultural intermediation. Meaning-centred conceptions such as they can be found in philosophy and the philologies are scarce. Nevertheless, there is a trend towards such hermeneutically strong approaches (Thumala Olave, 2018; Váňa, 2020b, 2021; Želinský et al., 2021), but it lacks a more

comprehensive framework that considers more seriously the *imbrication of meaning* in the diverse acts of producing, receiving, and criticizing literature. It is such an integrated conception that I propose in this article.

My thesis is that aesthetic artefacts are not merely competitive products that a specific class employs to indicate their *cultured* way of life. Literature is meaningful and this meaning is important not just within the text, but also in the way it is produced, received, and criticized. This meaning builds on the deeper structures that pattern life and civil discourse (Alexander and Smith, 1993, 2018). Literature is – and needs to be – continuously (re-)produced by interpretation and ongoing conversation, and it is this continuous reproduction and its basis of individual hermeneutics and collective discourse that is *cultural intermediation*. From the author, along with agents, publishers, distributors and critics towards readers: literary text is embedded in culture-specific context. All actors draw on this culture structure in their co-creation of text, and its meaning in a text's after-life in readership and public discourse. This meaning becomes imbricated in the public communicative space. It transcends the individual – author, editor or reader – and, thus, contributes to shaping the language of culture. It is in the *pre-life* of the artefact that the *potential* for meaning is aestheticized and materially produced. But it is only in its *after-life* that this potential unfolds.¹

A basic tenet is that literary text is the medium and all actors concerned with it mediate culture through it. This tenet grounds a hermeneutically strong conception of intermediation that tries to overcome the materialistic conceptions often found in sociological literature. It is a conception that builds a bridge between understanding the social production and reception of literature, and the ethical and moral dimensions that literary theory identifies in literary texts. A notion of cultural intermediation that takes meaning seriously needs to be positioned in a way that reflects how the aesthetic actually impacts a society's moral progress (or regress). It must not only consider the production of material text and abstract notions of art and entertainment, as if aesthetic production were disconnected from shaping civility and the boundaries of solidarity. Society incorporates literature as an irreducibly aesthetic – an interpretive resource – as cultural intermediation continuously takes place along with all actors hermeneutically involved. That is, cultural intermediation is neither gatekeeping, nor the distribution of material goods. Cultural intermediation entails more than simply identifying the next promising *cultural object* and promoting it to an audience.

I will outline in more detail what this means in the following sections. I will first reflect on available – both implicit and explicit – conceptions of cultural intermediation. I will then explain civil society and culture with a hermeneutically strong foundation. Ultimately, I will provide a concrete conception of cultural intermediation that builds on such a hermeneutically strong ontology. My interest in meaning here is focused on how the ethical and moral influence of literary fiction comes to existence. To be sure, literary text as such is, of course, just this: literary text; there are many ways to approach it. Standing in the tradition of a culturally strong sociology (the strong programme) as well as a conceptionally strong moral reasoning (discourse ethics), I focus on the ethical and moral dimension of literature. This advances Alexander's work on the civil sphere, which considers literature as an important actor, albeit without further theorizing it.

Conceptions of Cultural Intermediation Centring on Social Structure and Materiality

Conceptions of cultural intermediation are often reductive in the way they are focused on the social-structural space in between author and reader. They allow social structure the spotlight, while the cultural meaningfulness of intermediation remains out of view. The ways and means of production and reception are analytically dissected as the materiality of a book passes from authorial voice, via so-called intermediaries, to the hands of readers.

Editors and Agents as Intermediaries

Commonly thought of in respect to producing cultural products, intermediaries are those ‘*in-between* creative artists and consumers’ (Negus, 2002: 503; italics in original). These intermediaries appear to perform *gatekeeping*, and they do so within a social network of actors. At the core of such networks is the editor, but they are by no means acting alone. Editors are, in today’s conglomerated publishing industry (Steiner, 2018; Thompson, 2010), surrounded by scouts, agents and companions on whom they rely on for configuring what is worth screening. This is not only the case for debut authors; many authors today collaborate on new projects with agents before they work with their publishers. Respectively, the agents’ role ‘now cover[s] the pre-selection of publishable texts, work on authors’ presentations to publishers, followed by editorial work – sometimes considerable – on the text ahead of submission’ (de Bellaigue, 2008: 112). This importance of the literary agent as a social intermediary is well covered (Amlinger, 2021: 539–545; Childress, 2017: 61–82; Greco, 2005: 150; Lane, 1975; Thompson, 2010: 59–100). Intermediation is, in this sense, first and foremost a matter of *social intermediation* such that a network of actors sits in between the author and the *potential* of an audience.

We can also find empirical renderings of how intermediation continues to the realm of critics in the perspective of editors and agents. For instance, editors ‘have learned to habitually think about how the manuscript [. . .] might be reviewed’ (Fürst, 2018: 523); Bourdieu also concludes a fulfilment of the work of art in discourse about it (1996: 170) as do Marxist literary critics (Eagleton, 1996). Such studies tell us *that* editors pre-emptively consider the artefact in future public discourse. But the notion of intermediation usually finds its boundary in this pre-emptive action.

Looking for morally specific meaning-making and responsibilities that may be considered during the boundary work of those producing material text results in limited findings. Griswold’s study of the critical reception of literary text in three different societies identifies core features of cultural intermediation, and it refers to meaning-making as a key process. Critical reviews showcase how a critic’s horizon responds to text, and how this response becomes imbricated in further discourse, both highlighting existing codes and adding new potential for symbolic representation. However, Griswold errs where she claims that the ‘meanings attributed to any cultural object are *fabrications*, woven from the symbolic capacities of the object itself and from the perceptual apparatus of those who experience the object’ (1987: 1079; italics my own). Much rather, meaning is that which is mediated in the process of responding to the aesthetic. I will discuss in more

detail later the hermeneutics of reception, the mediation between authorial text and horizon of the reader. To call its relation to meaning a fabrication – a sort of manufacturing – throws the baby out with the bathwater by submitting culture to an overly constructivist ontology. As we can see in other sociologies, fabrication has a strongly active connotation. To yield facts in the lab, for instance, depends on discursive negotiations of the grounds of what a fact might be (Knorr-Cetina, 1981). Cultural meaning does not require definitions about whether something might be culturally significant or not; the significance of meaning is the defining feature itself, inherently.

Furthermore, in a study on the use of BookScan technology, Childress claims that editors continue to make publishing decisions as a matter of ‘gut business’ (2012: 617) as they use the technology only as posterior justification. Similarly, Fürst refers to ‘gut feeling’ in the discovery of new manuscripts (2018: 518). Employing a symbolic interactionist approach, Fürst divides intermediation into two phases: discovery and justification. This is pragmatically fruitful for identifying different reading strategies that come to be applied during discovery. Publishers are looking for publishable output, but they do not have a list of fixed criteria. Fürst’s analysis draws attention to a necessary openness in the discovery phase, calling it a focus on ‘means before ends’ (2018: 521). The editor becomes sensitized to certain output. And yet, Fürst only determines aesthetic reading or evaluation of ‘reading experience in relation to a convention’ (2018: 526) which merely relates to forms of taste or genre. Any relation to the civility (or differently termed references to morality) are avoided during such analyses. But gut feeling is not culturally unfounded, even though it might seem unconscious or subconscious in rational terms. If civil society strongly demands more inclusive authorship by way of ongoing public framing – especially so in times of civil unrest – agents and editors surely translate such framing into their actions, even unconsciously, in one way or another.

Another study finds that editors are said to make claims of buying *the right books*, but they seem to be unable to specify what this means beyond broad aesthetic criteria, referring to feeling, intuition, or comparable emotional terms (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013: 60–61). Likewise, one of the most comprehensive recent studies in the sociology of literature (Amlinger, 2021) can equally not contribute insights about this. Amlinger provides an 800-page study of the social settings and structures in which literary text is being produced. She touches on an author’s understanding of reasoning about *publishability* (2021: 516) or the normative moment of social recognition that is an influential motivator in authorial production (2021: 522). Perspectives on ethical and moral meaningfulness are, again, missing.

Materialism and Culture

The reason for this lack might be found in the strong tradition of sociologies of literature, which grew on the roots of materialist ontologies. The critical classics with writings from Benjamin (2007) and Adorno (1958) to Lukács (2021) and Löwenthal (1990) are key in this respect. Much can be learned from these texts, and they can be productive also for less materialistically reductive perspectives. However, many of today’s (post-)Marxist theorists remain in either a defeatist or a revolutionary tone. A strong claim continues to be that materialist structures and commodity fetishism reproduce ideology and mute

unwelcome voices, making intermediation itself more or less a function of ideology (Fuchs, 2020: 225). Intermediation here is preconditioned in a way that partly inhibits understanding empirical realities. Eagleton exemplifies how positioning literature, in the end, boils down to the question of whether or not one sees culture as always being ‘explainable by that form of contextualization for which the word “superstructure” is traditional Marxist shorthand’ (1988: 475).

To be sure, others in the Marxist tradition – among them the Birmingham school – allow for more variation. We can witness Hall’s (2019) widely used approach that is founded on more openness to meaning in reception. The narrated codes underlying novels, even within commodified literary production, may be able to assume the role of resistance and civil change. Jameson’s work is also foundational in enabling an understanding of the work of criticism, for instance, in respect to the nineteenth-century realism novel (2015) or the politics of the production of literature (1986). Nevertheless, besides the persistent revolutionary interest in literary text, the focus of Jameson rests on criticism much more than on configuring cultural intermediation as a function of literature vis-à-vis morality more broadly.

It is Bourdieu who achieved an advance from such Marxist shorthand by producing a series of critiques that form guiding texts for a diversity of studies on cultural intermediaries. This has become problematic in its own way, for in many Bourdieusian studies that follow in his wake, issues of power and domination are focal points and civil society is hardly considered. The strengths of Bourdieu’s study of literary production are visible in his reconstruction of the genesis of the French literary sphere (Bourdieu, 1996; cf. Bourdieu, 1983, 1984; Bourdieu and Bourdieu, 2015). His strongest followers are working in this direction (Heilbron and Sapiro, 2002; Sapiro, 2003, 2010; Swartz and Zolberg, 2004). And yet, this branch’s repetitive use of structural homologies and the focus on field-internal competition limits meaning-sensitive findings.

Literary production here always maintains ‘a relation of structural homology with the field of power’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 161). Bourdieu rightly voices the concern to overcome ‘the opposition between internal reading and external analysis’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 205); however, doing so with *field theory* means subscribing to a dependency of literary struggles ‘on the position [the] agents occupy in the structure of the field’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 206). It is, thence, always a question of class, of habitus, of claiming position in a field of power and legitimating the boundaries of art (Bourdieu, 1984: esp. III, 1996: 215–227). Literary interest here is particularistic and only internally competitive. Even political positions external to the literary field are analytically to be determined by ‘the specific “interests” associated with different positions’ *within the field* (Bourdieu, 1996: 231). As Nixon and Du Gay criticize (2002: 498), there is a serious concern to substantiate the role of cultural intermediaries anew after Bourdieu.

Looking at impactful studies in Bourdieu’s wake – and considering cultural specificity to be essential – this substance is still not sufficiently elaborated on. For instance, a lot can be learned about ‘a loss of symbolic capital during the globalization era’ (Sapiro, 2015: 339) in Sapiro’s study of translations of French literature in the USA. But we cannot learn much regarding deeper shifts of meaning that have taken place in the respective societies, and how these might also play a role. Similarly, Pareschi provides insights about agents, but we remain in a culturally vague reasoning of symbolic capital

(Pareschi, 2015: 410). In Fürst's study of the continuing success of debut authors, the specificity of authorial positions within their culture settings remains largely opaque as symbolic or economic forms of capital are the core explanations; in the end, it is success in competition that 'opens up structural opportunities for continuation' (Fürst, 2022: 11). Comparably, English acknowledges that, in a postcolonial world, the awarding of prizes also becomes a 'matter of genuine respect and recognition' (English, 2005: 298). And yet, his focus on competition and power cannot elucidate much on what the respective cultural inclusion or exclusion actually means or empowers. A study of the Booker Prize for Fiction remains similarly at the level of definitions of art and consecration without considering the cultural meaningfulness of the literature awarded (Childress et al., 2017).

Particularly Childress' book-length study of the publication of a single novel from beginning to end is among the most comprehensive recent works in the English-speaking sociology of literature. Nonetheless, intermediaries and their decision-making are hardly regarded with respect to wider cultural meaning and civil society. Childress finds 'four prongs through which [editors] decide what to publish: perceptions of artistic ability; their own tastes, interests, and experiences; perceptions of market feasibility; and perceived fit with the publisher' (Childress, 2017: 93). However, as abilities and taste-related qualities need to correspond to fit and feasibility *in competition*, we cannot learn much about what this means in relation to ethical or moral meaningfulness. This analysis traces intermediaries ethnographically in, for instance, their enthusiasm for a manuscript, but not in regard to morality. This is the case even though Childress accounts for the issue that for 'Black male authors [. . .] in 2015 there were two findable Black male literary agents in the United States (fewer than one-fifth of 1 percent of all agents)' (Childress, 2017: 74). Childress does not much explore the meaning of this.² Moreover, Childress co-studied the influence of discourse in book clubs and reading circles on readers' reception of literary text. They are able to determine a change that is, by methodical probability, attributable to this discourse. Interpersonal influences and social-structural positions seem to be guiding forces. And yet, the actual meaningfulness of 'cultural objects' (Childress and Friedkin, 2012: 63) that they aim to determine remains opaque within quantitative abstraction. The conceptual terminology cannot capture the hermeneutics involved at the level of both individual reception and its discursive imbrication.

Conclusively, though having merit in their own ways, these approaches exhibit just that 'numbness toward meaning' which Alexander and Smith refer to in their outline of a structural hermeneutics (2001: 138). Such studies inform us about competition and structural homologies, but they do not explain intermediation and gatekeeping in relation to civil society; cultural meaningfulness in between the authorial voice and the eyes of readers is cut out by a focus on social settings, competition, or aesthetic tastes. This is the case even though one of the fundamental assumptions about literary authorship is that of subjective expressiveness – of having something to say (Amlinger, 2021: 584–592). Fürst himself also accounts for this knowledge gap as he points to the need to study in more detail the role of content in literary production (2022: 12).

In the end, in their overview of the research on cultural intermediaries, Maguire and Matthews claim that analysis needs to 'put context (back) into considerations of cultural

intermediaries' (2012: 553). Connecting the foregoing discussion with this claim, I propose to consider civil society to fare as an essential context that needs to be better understood. Civil sphere theory is particularly helpful for this discussion as it ontologically positions civility as a relatively autonomous culture structure next to more particularistic structures of economic competition or aesthetic taste. In other words, symbolic knowledge of moral issues can exist relatively independent from social-structural issues. Civil sphere theory provides a comprehensive theory for this. It opens a perspective for considering moral meaningfulness *next to* matters of power and competition, and to study how actors balance these. In the next section, I will provide an outline of this conception.

Hermeneutics of Morality and Cultural Intermediation

Literary text needs to be regarded as meaningful by way of its position, from its co-production onwards, in the manifolds of the phenomenology of individual readings acts, engagements in discourse about it, and the ways these become causes in the lifeworlds of actors. Before outlining this conception, I will explain the hermeneutics of morality and civil sphere theory.

Morality and Civil Society

Meaning exists 'in autonomous and patterned ways as culture structures that circulate through social life' (Alexander and Smith, 2018: 13; see also: Alexander and Smith, 2001). Ethical and moral knowledge crystallizes in such culture structures; it is hermeneutically available to individuals and can be studied as a discourse of civil society.

In the Kantian tradition, the distinction between ethical issues (the good life) and moral ones (justice, equality, etc.) is its situatedness (Habermas, 1991, 1992). The good life is specific to a community or society at any time. If this society tries to solve questions such as: what is right generally and not simply good for *us here and now*, it develops morally. At such instances, society tries to align its ethical and moral dimension; the good life becomes closer to a just life for all. Where Habermas provides the normative philosophy for this understanding, Alexander's civil sphere theory grounds it in cultural sociological terminology.³ Alexander incorporates said distinction implicitly by defining civility as that sphere that compels actors to act with an *appeal to universalism* from within their cultural and social situatedness.⁴ Civil sphere theory highlights how the empirical realities of civil society encompass the agonism of democratic life and efforts to transcend exclusive notions of we-ness. That is, it is *within* the civil sphere that we find the democratic back and forth of being more – or less – inclusive as a society, of better incorporating weaker members within, or of allowing more solidarity with outgroups. Studying this allows us to see whether an appeal to universalism is effective, or whether moral backlash hinders actors (insisting on the good life of a few at the expense of more justice). Likewise, particularistic interest, such as it is visible in economic competition, often counters more equality within society.⁵

By deciphering the language of civility, civil sphere theory helps to identify particularism without shunning (sidelined or hidden) appeals to more universalism. This

marks the strength of this theory; it articulates the *meaningfulness of situatedness*. It shows that society's ethical and moral collective consciousness is not abstract but articulated through the symbolic patterns that structure its language(s), codes, and iconic narratives (Alexander, 2006: 31–36). These patterns enable actors to 'speak graphically about a society's highest values, its relevant groups, its boundaries *vis-à-vis* conflict, creativity, and internal dissent' (Alexander, 1998: 31; italics in original). And these symbolic patterns – the discourse of civil society (Alexander and Smith, 1993) – can be found in all sorts of speeches, texts, or statements. Literary fiction is one of its key pillars; through literature, an author gives 'voice to the idealized aspirations of civil society' (Alexander, 2006: 77). A literary author can, in this respect, be regarded as an actor in civil society;⁶ they shape civil discourse by drawing meaningfully on ethical or moral issues.⁷ This is particularly true if we think of moral backlash and civil unrest.

When civil society comes under pressure, literature can play a vital, educative role. Populism, for instance, expands a potentially morally regressive, anti-civil discourse (Alexander et al., 2021) that tends to deceive a public. Literary fiction can fare as a cornerstone against this in the way it entices public discourse to more critical reflection. Think only of the surge of book sales of novels with (anti-)totalitarian themes after the election of Donald Trump (de Freytas-Tamura, 2017). Ideology can be decisive to understanding this, but it is concrete and specific to a wealth of actions of production, reception, and public discourse. This is why an understanding of the ethical-moral dimension of literary fiction – or the role of fictional literature as an actor within civil society – requires a hermeneutically strong conception of cultural intermediation.

Outline of a Tripartite Conception

I propose to regard cultural intermediation more profoundly hermeneutically in this way, and to differentiate between three modes of intermediation that are analytically independent, while they remain empirically connected and overlapping, as shown in Figure 1. This tripartite differentiation leans on Jauß's hermeneutically strong conception of aesthetic experience (1982: 46–110), divided into *poiesis* (the productive aspect of aesthetic experience); *aesthesis* (the receptive aspect of aesthetic experience); and *catharsis* (the communicative efficacy of aesthetic experience).

First, *productive intermediation* comprises all actions that co-produce literary text itself. This is most often initiated with a first draft of an author and continues to interventions of agents and editors, and ends with the distribution of material text. The mode of productive intermediation might be seen as being close to material conceptions of cultural intermediation where a gatekeeper intermediates between author and reader. It shifts focus, though; concentrating on meaning-making in production requires considering actors involved in (co-)creating meaningful text by making decisions about aesthetic form, substance, and matters of inclusion and exclusion not only in respect to taste or convention, but also in terms of civil discourse.

Second, *receptive intermediation* concerns the reception of a text in the context of a concrete lifeworld. Any actor responds to text with specific interpretive input. This co-creates individualized, highly subjective text as a personal reading, resulting in

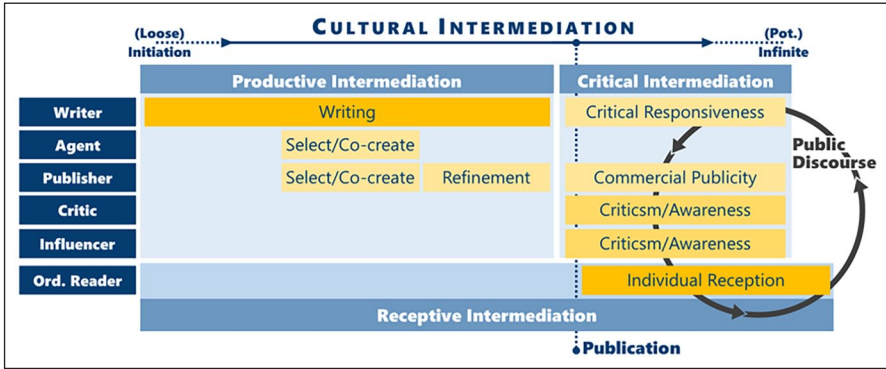


Figure 1. Cultural intermediation with (selected) key actors as well as its three modes of productive, receptive, and critical intermediation.

idiosyncratic meaning. Receptive intermediation is multifaceted. It takes place whether it is the author rereading his or her own writing, the editor assessing it, a scholar using it as a resource, or an ordinary reader turning to the material text for any kind of reason (pleasure, education etc.). The necessity of stepping from this principled matter of hermeneutics towards receptive intermediation is to concentrate on the meaning-making in the context of culture that takes place in reception. Everyday morality is influenced by the grammar of civility inscribed in a lifeworld; receptive intermediation highlights this inscribing.

Third, *critical intermediation* comprises all actions that concern (public) discourse about the meaning of a text. This might be in the form of promotion, professional criticism, or semi-public discussion in reading circles. Critical intermediation is analytically dichotomous; it takes place before receptive intermediation (each reading is already embedded in discourse on literature) as well as after it. It is this mode of intermediation that is critical for literature to fulfil its significance within society, since it is the binding force that gathers individual responses in a shared language. Discourse about text transcends the individual but builds upon individual reception, nonetheless. Contradictory readings are confronted with each other, perspectives on narratives, their ethical and moral underpinnings, are negotiated, and their working as signs becomes the matter of (semi-)public argument. In return, this feeds back influence of specific readings to individuals, whose lifeworlds may subsequently change.

These modes are interconnected and can be layered. An editor may engage in all three modes, while the ordinary reader does so actively only in the second. They are also all affected in one way or another by instances of public discourse. A writer, usually seen as an initiator, can also assume the role of a critical intermediary if they render the text meaningful in a specific way, for instance by positioning it in relation to biographical details in an interview. Differentiating these phases allows a consideration of the actions in relation, without reducing them. I will explicate in more detail what they stand for in the following section.

A Hermeneutically Strong Conception of Cultural Intermediation

Productive Intermediation

The initial phase of cultural intermediation is not a filtering in the sense of gatekeeping. Productive intermediation cannot be captured by a transmission model of culture. Instead, intermediaries are to be seen as active actors in constant dialogue. They draw – tacitly or consciously – on existing structures in their decision-making of what to mediate. Productive intermediation positions material production as an *enabling* of cultural potential. Agents, editors, or editorial programme directors all contribute to enabling narratives to be heard by a wider public.

Even in the most competitive capitalist environment in which increasing conglomeration seems to devour meaningful publishing (Schiffrin, 2001; Steiner, 2018), *to publish* still portends to provide a means for impacting symbolic representation. Publishers organizationally bind actions concerned with the material production of literature (that is, broadly, transforming author manuscript into distributed material text, may it be printed or digital). But such actions of material production do not take place in a meaningless space. In other words, even though publishing actors have to respond to relentless media market regimes and requirements of returns on investments, their actions still encompass a cultural dimension that becomes inscribed within the material they produce. They contribute meaningfully to guiding author voices to potential audiences, being both impacted by and impacting the symbolic forms that become distributed.

To be sure, there are contributions that show little potential for affecting moral issues. Think of dime novels, cheap Westerns, or crimes. They are produced on a massive scale for entertainment. Nevertheless, genre literature is not to be easily dismissed as generally meaningless. Any society continuously produces its critical themes, and literary authorship is key for finding fitting aesthetics that highlight aspects of such themes, confronting readership with the task of asking new questions that the myths of traditions cannot answer. On one hand, this might mean that even (seemingly meaningless) genre literature can have moral impact (Radway, 1991). On the other hand, such genres also produce literary-rich forms that stand out in the long run. Think of Simenon's Maigret or Chandler's Marlow books; they appear to be simple crime novels, but they are culturally significant in depicting milieu and ethical developments of their times. Even more so, McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Williams' *Butcher's Crossing* employ the aesthetic of the Western to point to essential moral features in the making of US society. These authors make use of accessible forms to provide deep moral correctives. Taking part in the material production of such books – essentially contributing to *publishing* them – means to enable a potential for civil repair, highlighting and pushing against historic wrongs by drawing on the appeal to universalism within the civil sphere.

Authors lay foundations for this impact; agents, editors and the likes need to make these foundations accessible. To be sure, publishing decisions are steeped in economic demands of returns and feasibility. Economic competition is a constant strain on the civil sphere; its particularistic interests – for instance, the exploitative demands of efficiency and hierarchy fostered by capitalist market regimes – tend to undermine civil society's

actions towards more equality or social justice. How is this to be interpreted vis-à-vis the lasting impact literature is said to have on civil society (Docherty, 2006; Felski, 2008; Nussbaum, 1997)? One answer is to see economic competition also as a provider of potential resources and capacities to fostering more inclusivity, and of expanding civil discourse by distributing key narratives further. No actor in a highly capitalist society can undermine economic competition; but they can make use of their position by contributing to civil repair. An agent may justify their pitching a debut novel because of its assumed relevance in the context of a corresponding thematic public discourse; the editorial manager may reuse this initial justification in their own pitch to the editorial director, perhaps also considering in this pitch already the potential of a future, politically critical review that may provide publicity. Such justifications are essential for cultural intermediation since the reasons given for making one text accessible at the expense of another reflects at a systemic level aspects of a society's ethical and moral dimension. It is a reasoning that is likely to circle around (or interweave) corresponding themes from public discourse if a manuscript in question touches on relevant themes, particularly in times of civil unrest.

As this reasoning unfolds in subsequent – but pre-emptively considered – steps, this tentatively called circling and interweaving becomes an imbrication. Like tiles on a roof, individual instances of reasoning – from author to agent, publisher and critics – mesh with each other, form layers, and ultimately present a coherent rationale that binds the authorial voice to contemporary moral issues. Think of novels that were produced and got substantial praise during the outbursts of Black Lives Matters protests in the USA, such as Jeffers' *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Woodson's *Red at the Bone*, or Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*. Whitehead himself stated that, after the publication of *Underground Railroad*, he did not want to 'deal with such depressing material again' but was compelled to do so after the election of Donald Trump as President, proclaiming a call to action through art (Israel, 2019). Of course, materialist reasoning can claim that agent, publisher and critic looked at the following novels only because of its economic potential. A civilly engaged reasoning will instead also consider a moral meaningfulness that is visible in the material production of these novels, in the context of a discourse that attempts fundamental civil repair.

This conception of imbricated reasoning surrounding literary production does not claim that there are necessarily direct or overlapping justifications. It does not determine a teleological account of literary production. Much rather, this conception of an imbrication helps to take account of a *meaningfully interconnected* drawing on the symbolic patterns of civil discourse within the *chronologically separated* instances of decision-making. This builds the foundation of the afterlife of the work of art. And to be sure, a conception that builds on a strong hermeneutics does not posit that materialist approaches are wrong. The many works especially in the wake of Bourdieu – such as those accounted for earlier – that look at power and material interest in art generally, and literary publishing specifically, clarify important aspects. Consider only the crucial work by Sinykin (2023) on the disturbing impact that structures of power can have on the question of who is allowed to contribute to literary fiction in the first place. Similar arguments of asymmetries of power can be made, for instance, for the realm of translation (Sapiro, 2015). Social structure and interest are important to understand literature in its institutional frame; but they are not everything.

Receptive Intermediation

Reception is cultural intermediation since the aesthetic triggers a mediation between lifeworld and new symbolic form. Any reader is an intermediary as they inherently perceive idiosyncratic meaning in response to a text. In reception, the intersection of aestheticized form and substance (transformed by it) is decisive.

Literary text is not simply information. Notions of civility are not being communicated by explication but by *aesthetic transformation*. Informative explication tells civil discourse; it is directive: this is right, and this is wrong. Aesthetic transformation is reflective; it means taking what is seen (by an author) to be right and wrong and turning it into an aestheticized, symbolic form that allows the meaning of this right and wrong to be identified through interpretation. Harriet Beecher Stowe did not simply *say* slavery is bad. Philip Roth did not just *inform* Americans that their integration of Jews is defective. Toni Morrison did not merely provide the *directive information* that the history of slavery continues to be a burden up until today. They articulated civil discourse by showing and narrating. Indeed, Morrison professes a ‘painstaking work of description’ (Love, 2010: 387) in which the reader becomes immersed, gaining access to new hermeneutic territory through reflection. In other words, an author’s aesthetic transformation allows readers to learn, to gain the competence of making moral judgements themselves.

The ethical and moral meaningfulness of literature exists *because of* such aesthetic transformation. The aesthetic is key for understanding the impact of literary text on ethical and moral reflection; texture, atmosphere, characters, narrative and the like are central for the text to becoming meaningful. It is the aesthetic as form that compels readers to read; it is this that triggers readers to question previously held beliefs, pushing boundaries of moral imagination by being given new epistemic expressions and justifications. The summary of a plot does not suffice, even though it tells the same story.

Considered sociologically with a strong conception of hermeneutics, any text is not meaningful as such or as a definite statement.⁸ Underlying this is a Kantian epistemology of aesthetic experience. An artefact as such is not meaningful; it is mute without readership. Reception is the action that allows it to become meaningful. This is the case when an editor assesses a manuscript, when a critic dives into the depths of text, and, just as well, when the ordinary reader embarks on the individual reading experience. Through reception, actors perceive meaning and act upon it in one way or another. The artefact triggers responses of symbolic configuration firstly by way of reception, the reflection it evokes, and posteriorly by discourse about this reception and reflection. Thus, the grounds of meaning become procedural in action and it always remains ambiguous in a transitory state of individual reception and collective discourse.

Gadamer’s hermeneutics is helpful for understanding reflection in the reading experience. Civil sphere theory articulates the crystallization of ethical and moral meaning as symbolic patterns within language. But how does it change through literary text? Gadamer clarifies the dialogical process of reception, of an actor’s language meeting the language of a text. This meeting necessarily takes place within the lifeworld of an individual where – within language – both the objects are made to speak, and the listener has been shaped to hear for a long time. ‘All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language which would allow the object

to come into words and yet at the same time the interpreter's own language' (Gadamer, 2014: 407).⁹ Gadamer conceptualizes a reader's cultural situatedness as a subjective horizon; it is shaped by historical residues of tradition and contextualizes any potential for meaningfulness that might happen through reading. Reception triggers a merging of the symbolic forms induced by the author with the cultural knowledge of the reader, generating a shift in the horizon of the latter. This is how, in reception, civil society and its moral signification arrives in the everyday language of actors (cf. Habermas, 1981: 190, 1992: 428).

Critical Intermediation

There is no private language. The idiosyncratic meaning perceived individually always stands in dialogue with the discourse of society more generally. An early, profound conception of this is Habermas' reconstruction of the development of the (European) public sphere based on the structural changes of social life, political economy, and media publicity. Habermas accounts for the importance of private *and* public reflection as interrelated pillars for the evolving grounds of deliberative democracy. Literary criticism is decisive, for in its response the ordinary reader matures and becomes a discerning actor with the competence to form judgements (Habermas, 1990: 103; 140; cf. Habermas, 1992: 435–467). It is this discourse that marks the essence of critical intermediation, even though the public within which it takes place is no longer a physical one.

Idiosyncratic meaning turns to idiomatic resource of symbolic representation in this public sphere. Only through discourse – and not already in individual reception – can the narratives of a literary text, its textures, symbolic forms and codes assume the status of more unified and commonly agreeable – if nevertheless ambivalent – signs. In discourse about text, characters and their (anti-)heroic journeys stand for something; the narrative is made to represent a relatable point of discussion; a *mise-en-scène* becomes a spatial-temporal reference with significance. Aesthetic instances become iconic *only* in discourse.

Literature here fulfils its role as a structural cause on action, not only for the few who read but for the many. If it succeeds in reaching this significance, literary text accomplishes the magnificent task of shaping the horizon of more than the reading minority, of being a consensual sign. This can be drawn on explicitly. Reference to specific texts or characters can enable widely comprehensible support for claims on right and wrong; this means emphasizing Huckleberry Finn, Holden Caulfield, or Lolita as universal signposts. Fairy tales and fables are perhaps the most prominent examples here (Breithaupt, 2022). Emotional responses to everyday actions can likewise be shaped by the background knowledge of certain narratives. *Tilting at windmills* is an imagery that transcends its Don Quixoteian origins just as the characteristic of being *Kafkaesque* is an idiom way beyond its literary initiation. Canonization is closely connected to this in that a canon is always also a reference to community and its culturally meaningful (self-) characterization. Canons are lasting attempts to unify not simply narratives or aesthetic tastes, but articulations of civil discourse. The Great American Novel, from *Moby-Dick* to *The Adventures of Augie March*, exemplifies ethical unification and moral contestation in its narration of American we-ness (Buell, 2014). Similarly, the body of literature

constructed by the Nobel prize can be read as a canon of ethical specificity and moral universalism. Many awarded works are ethically specific: Thomas Mann's work substantially catches the specifically German bourgeoisie; Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* narrates features quintessential to Russian lifeforms; Orhan Pamuk's tales forcefully bring to life what it means to be Turkish. Still, these same works also aesthetically transform the realizations and shortcomings of an appeal towards we-transcending justice in almost universal symbolic forms.

Moreover, literary text contributes to matters of cultural inclusion by publicly shaping the notion of *the people*, by pushing the boundaries of a normal, and by eroding previously – and consensually – held beliefs of civil solidarity. Consider the fear of being a Jew and the specifically American alienation of Jewish life that Roth narrates in *The Plot Against America* or *The Human Stain*.¹⁰ Read by millions and repeatedly discussed in public life, Roth here contributed to changing the way an American public looks at Jewish life in their midst, and that the American course of history – despite its claimed exceptionalism – bears the potential for systemic Jewish destruction as many other western nations did and do. This literature is an iconic referent. Public discourse can always come back to it amid resurgences of hate and civil backlash in order to point out: this is the *Plot* we are caught up in, and it leads to destruction. Reference to Roth's literature is a call to moral action and solidarity in the way it helps us to understand anti-civil motives. Similarly, consider Uwe Tellkamp's novels on the fall of East Germany and the failed civil reunification with West Germany. A combined reading of *Der Turm* and *Der Schlaf in den Uhren* elucidates how the former East had its own civil code, and that the forced integration of East into West – instead of a real *unification* – contributed to eliminating it. Thus, literary form, intermediated by public discourse, can help the German population understand the meanings and democratic dimensions of today's civil unrest that is attributed to these failings (cf. Oschmann, 2023).

To be sure, the irreducibility of the manifolds of narratives, characters and representations in aestheticized forms prohibits seeing literary texts as *merely* signs in public discourse. Each text can be treated in respect to a variety of meaningful ways, while the notion of civility remains – dialectically irreducible as an element of the aesthetic – in the background of discourse. It is precisely in its irreducibility that literary text assumes this special role. The aesthetic serves as representation for a specific case, and it remains specific even though discourse has demolished this specificity with a patina of converging readings. Literary text remains a text to be read and appreciated individually. That it fares as a collective resource for society, that it becomes a mediating kernel of meaning, or that it becomes entrenched in narrating morality are no matters of what might be termed *aesthetic alienation*. The text remains the text, it remains a work of art, solitary and on its own. And it does so only the more if it develops into an icon. Reading *Anna Karenina* or *The Scarlet Letter* is irreducible; nevertheless, their notions of repression and liberation have entered the public imagination in transcendent, symbolic form. Anna Karenina and Hester Prynne serve as iconic characters of feminine liberation. They may be used reductively in public discourse as icons for a cause; nevertheless, individually reading their moral specificity brings with it a whole palette of ambiguities and non-reductive grey zones that actually undergird this iconicity. The constructed, authorial voice that public discourse distils from the manifold readings of text confronts and

alleviates society vis-à-vis its moral strivings. It fares as a reminder of a universalism that – as the civil sphere insists – can never be fulfilled in its culturally situated form.

The critic is essential for this transcendence, but they are not the singular core of critical intermediation. Critics perform various roles – ranging from the radio show host who discusses the rising debut novelist in everyday language, to the accessible feuilleton writer and the academically minded producer of a critique of art. They approach literary text from differing positions and propose interpretive perspectives to like-minded publics. Academic discourse on literature – be it excavating forgotten classics or considering the value of the most recent advance – is essential, too, for it constructs a communicative scaffolding with which the aesthetic can be critiqued, and its meaning evaluated. Far from being an exact science disconnected from lifeworlds, the humanities are a communicative arena that is profoundly interconnected with cultural meaning and civility in its progress from tradition to ever-looming modernity (Gabriel, 2020; Marquard, 2020). In this respect, critics are valuable by providing a language for elucidating essential features of a text in public discourse.

For the individual, a text might evoke its meaning even without such tools of explication. This does not make the critic redundant, though. Critics remain significant in that they keep the communicative space around literary text alive as such. The *procedural character* of dialogue about literary text, about transfiguring the symbolic form into public reference, is essential for society. The role of the critic here may even align with that of the librarian or bookseller who opens space for readings and exchange, facilitating the potential of intersubjectivity, so that literary texts assume their positions integrated in democratic society. Critics, in other words, keep the conversation going, on diverse levels of social-structural engagement, with diverse aesthetics at hand. Keeping this conversation going means keeping a potential for deliberation and civil repair alive in the public sphere.

Conclusion: Art beyond Competition and Aesthetic Acclaim

Subscribing to the notion that literary texts impact morality requires a sociology of literature to consider how literary text *can* and *does* become meaningful, and how this meaningfulness crystallizes in society's civil discourse. Centring meaning in this way demands a conception of cultural intermediation to transcend the mere production of materiality and aesthetic acclaim. What is mediated in respect to an ethical and moral dimension is not a text in between writer and reader; triggered by the text, meaning is mediated as a continuous process of reception and discourse. Mediation does not end with the publication. Much rather, it really begins in the moment a text is released into public discourse, provided its potential is being met by a fruitfully open audience. The material text is being produced before publication, but its meaning is determined in the dialectic of reception and public discourse about it. That is, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is read by millions; but it was the prolonged discourse about it that enabled a reference that is sustained even by those who have not read it. In between the idiosyncrasy of individual reading and discourse about it opened a communicative space in which meaning was shaped and reshaped. It is in this space that the novel evokes its moral force by providing a

discursive reference to civil discourse; it is here that ‘Atticus Finch, the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism’ endures as a lasting moral icon (Crespino, 2000: 10).

Against critics who might argue that literary fiction is mere entertainment and economic product today, a vast array of counter-examples can be given. These range, given as references throughout this text, from explicitly morally engaged literature such as is visible vis-à-vis Black Lives Matter to highly poetic renderings of (anti-) civility in novels from Tellkamp to Jünger. Consider only a novel such as *To the End of the Land* by David Grossman that enables the public to understand the moral strivings and struggles within Israeli–Palestinian conflict in a rich, lasting narrative. The fact that this book is an international bestseller – even though it deals with difficult themes – can hardly only be attributed to economic reasons or means of authorial or media power. It is a prime example of elucidating civil discourse in aestheticized form.

This article’s call to more meaningful explorations of cultural intermediation should not be read as a negation of materialistic competition; today’s work of art necessarily lives within capitalist society and its social structures and competitive mechanisms. Despite its paradigmatic focus on field theory, and France specifically, Bourdieu’s work on power and convention in literary production and the impact of the *petite bourgeoisie* on reception continues to have its merits. The many works following in his wake testify to his profundity, as accounted for earlier in this article. I have also touched on the irreducibility of the individual work of art to exemplify that any aesthetic form can be seen as just this: aesthetic form. All this does not diminish art’s meaningfulness for civil society, though. A publishing organization may require a sales strategy for their products, thus seemingly reducing text to commodity; but an editor still perceives text meaningfully in relation to the society an audience is situated in. A critic may disintegrate a text with recourse to his or her theoretical school and toolkit; still, texts fare as meaningful impulses within society in the discourse that criticism keeps alive. A reader may just consume literature for pleasure or as a habit on the commute; texts, nevertheless, leave their marks on the reader’s horizon. And, ultimately, an individual who seeks to live as a writer needs to produce text for a living; the materiality – however geared towards a *zeitgeist* it may be – is mediated by an impulse of meaning-to-be-communicated.

Highlighting this meaningfulness does not mean that literary fiction *necessarily* partakes in democratic life or that literature *needs* to be seen as a political actor in society. Any text can speak for itself (in the ways authors and readers want it to speak). This only asks for programmatic scholarship in this direction: in order to ‘let the literature speak for itself’ (Váňa, 2020a: 8) in a cultural sociology of literature, we must understand what this *speaking* means and why certain literatures are able to do so in the first place. There is no *objective speaking* of a text. So, what does *speaking for itself* mean for a hermeneutically strong sociology of literature? Moreover, why is this literary text available and not another? Why is this societal substance expressed through that aesthetic form? Particularly in times of civil unrest, agents, editors and critics must position themselves towards concrete moral responsibilities, either by actively neglecting engagement or by pitching, reviewing, or honouring relevant works. How are they relevant and what is happening in this neglecting and engaging? In short, this comes down to the question: To what degree do these productive intermediaries draw on civil discourse, or are inhibited to do so because of other factors such as the economy or aesthetic acclaim? Having a stronger

conception and adequate terminology of cultural intermediation will help in answering such questions. It enables a conceptual language against the cynicism of a worldview in which literature is simply material competition without much use for society's morality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues at the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University for their feedback on earlier ideas. Special thanks to Philip Smith for his advice on a first draft of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) with a postdoctoral stipend (Walter Benjamin Stipendium).

ORCID iD

Marcel Knöchelmann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1050-1303>

Notes

1. This wording borrows from Benjamin who elaborated on the notion of the afterlife of a work of art in his dissertation and concretized it in later works on translation and the German tragic game (Benjamin, 1992, 2016).
2. This issue is still highly relevant. In a more recent study, we can find that particularly among those actors commissioning content there are still 'issues of ethnic diversity' in the USA (Roberts, 2021: 259).
3. In Habermas, culture structures are vital, too, as they form a key pillar of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1981, 1983).
4. Instead of being normative, morality is empirically grounded in civil sphere theory (Alexander, 2000) so that its universality can always only be approached – and not (abstractly theoretically) fulfilled.
5. Habermas and Alexander remain divided in respect to how destructive capitalism is to modern society. Habermas strongly criticizes the capitalist threat of reductionism (of rational discourse) (1981: 420); Alexander criticizes Habermas for being overly reductionist himself (2006: 194). This article does not have the space to elaborate further on this division. It can only acknowledge that literature, part of the so-called culture industry, might be a prime example of materializing in this dichotomy of being both positively *and* negatively affected by capitalism. We will see more of this ambivalence later in the article.
6. *Civil society* is not to be understood as a dedicated social sub-group of society. Like the *sphere*, it is an analytical category that allows us to understand in what ways an actor draws on a civil sphere's symbolic patterns (such as its ethical and moral values). Being part of civil society takes place in action (such as authorship).
7. To be sure, this by no means implies that authors *necessarily* fare as actors within civil society, or that they *need* to be politically active actors for the text to be meaningful.
8. In reception, there is no limit on the text (Barthes, 1978). It involves the active reader in the co-creation of the work (Eco, 1979). Readers dialectically contribute to the historical construction of the meaningful body of literature, as Jauß explicates with (non-Marxist) recourse to Marx (Jauß, 1970: 164).

9. Gadamer is informed by the early Heideggerian aesthetic theory which posits that any action of reception is necessarily rendered by its hermeneutic situatedness. There is no understanding without a previous notion of what is to be understood (cf. Gadamer, 2014: 244–263). Ethical meaningfulness requires a substratum in the reader; being more universal in its language, the narration of moral issues appears to be more intuitively comprehensible.
10. Alexander also highlights the critical discourse aroused by Philip Roth and the way he reconstructed the ambiguities of assimilation and inclusion of Jews in the USA (2006: 533–538).

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Author biography

Marcel Knöchelmann is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University. His scholarly interests are discourse ethics, civil sphere theory, and how the two can be used to understand authorship and literary fiction in society. Marcel received his PhD from University College London in 2021 with a cultural sociology of authorship and publishing in the humanities. He is a trained bookseller.