

Offentlighetens gränser:

Fem kultursociologiska studier av kontroverser kring litterära
självframställningar i Sverige, 1976–2008

av

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with normative boundaries in the Swedish literary public sphere between 1976 and 2008. One aim of the study is to map changes and continuities in the boundary between public and private as defined, defended, and contested by literary critics, editors, publishers, writers, journalists, and various other participants in public discussions of literature. A further aim is to suggest a sociological explanation of the normative changes that are discerned in the course of analysis. Thus, the dissertation not only focuses on normative boundaries between “civilized” and “uncivilized” literary self-expression, but also on the contextual boundaries of participation in literary debates. On the contextual level, the literary public sphere is conceptualized as an establishment or “good society”, held together and separated from outsiders by common norms of civilized literary expression but subject to varying degrees of pressure from below. Increased contacts between established critics and new media participants – enabled by tendencies of media convergence, a feminization of the journalism and literary criticism professions, and a “demotic” turn in media culture – are hypothesized to contribute to an increased pressure from below, leading in turn to dissociations from the established civility norms and contestations of these norms from the standpoint of a radical ideal of authenticity. Such a normative shift, it is argued, might be conceptualized as informalization.

The dissertation’s empirical focus is upon debates over controversial autobiographical literary works in Swedish metropolitan newspapers from 1976 to 2008. Five cases of debates are identified and analyzed in chronological order. The analyses of the debates are built on a qualitative computer aided text analysis of 169 explicitly evaluative articles published in the culture sections of Swedish metropolitan newspapers.

Though the results of the study by no means indicate dissolution of the normative boundary between public and private in the literary public sphere, the analyses suggest certain tendencies of change on the normative level. On the one hand, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the normative boundaries of civilized literary self-expression were mainly drawn in aesthetic terms; in order to be seen as civilized, literary autobiographies had to conceal the inappropriate bodily needs, desires, and emotions of the author by means of aesthetic form. In the studied cases from the 1990s and early 2000s, however, these aesthetic demands seemed to face increasing competition from a moral concern with the integrity of others depicted in the autobiographical works, a concern increasingly expressed by literary critics and lawyers calling for stricter moral boundaries in literature. This moralization tendency is interpreted as a move from aesthetic “rules of precedence”, exempting literature from general moral norms, to moral “rules for all”, making no distinction between literary and other kinds of publicness. On the other hand, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, authentic openness about emotional experiences in literary self-expression had been acceptable only if it was held to be of common concern (for instance if it provided opportunities for positive political identification). In the cases from the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the ideal of authenticity in literary self-expression was radicalized; direct authentic self-expression was seen increasingly as an anti-elitist action, a popular disclosure and confrontation of the duplicity of the cultural establishment dominating the official literary public sphere. This ideal of anti-elitist authenticity was most clearly expressed by actors who were closer to the margins of the literary public sphere, for instance blog writers, editorial writers recruited from the blogosphere, or popular media figures. All this indicates a demotic informalizing pressure from below, enabled by a general tendency towards convergence between literature and other media.

Keywords: public/private, public sphere, civility, authenticity, informalization, autobiography, literary criticism, modernity, Sweden