Affective Systems: Luhmann, Gumbrecht, and the Exhaustion of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interplay between Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's concept of presence, focusing on the exhaustion of meaning in culture. Luhmann redefines society as an autopoietic network of communications in which order emerges through recursive selection rather than cultural identity. This abstraction, though precise, marginalises lived experience. Gumbrecht's focus on presence—embodied, affective, and atmospheric—reveals what systems theory tends to overlook. By synthesising these perspectives, the article proposes an affective systems approach, viewing meaning and presence as co-constitutive in communication. It examines how affect circulates in digital environments where algorithms transform emotions into feedback loops. Culture, thus, becomes an oscillation between code and sensation, balancing systemic coherence with the human longing for immediacy. This framework reimagines systems theory as attuned to societal moods, offering a nuanced understanding of modernity's tension between abstraction and vitality, where even formal systems resonate with intensity and desire.

Keywords: Systems Theory; Affective Systems; Meaning Culture; Presence; Autopoiesis; Contingency; Semantics; Luhmann; Gumbrecht

INTRODUCTION

Imagine attending a thrilling sports match where fans cheer wildly and players compete with raw intensity. Yet the encounter is shadowed by a silent calculation of statistics and odds, by thoughts of better strategies elsewhere. What was once a vibrant exchange of energy and movements becomes a sequence of athletic transactions—measured, optimised, and detached. In a world society saturated by sports systems, time feels compressed. Moments are filtered through the logic of performance, where even spontaneity is subordinated to victory. The drive for optimisation eclipses raw, unmediated contact with the world's sensory immediacy.

Behind this transformation stands a decisive theorist: Niklas Luhmann. His systems theory proposes that society is not a collection of individuals but a network of communications that self-organises through its own internal codes. The sports match, in this view, is not merely a site of human interaction but a subsystem of the sport system governed by the binary distinction of win/loss, operating independently of personal intention. Luhmann's perspective redirects attention from actors to operations, from shared values to the recursive processes through which order continuously emerges. Rather than taking culture as his theoretical foundation, he redefines systems as communicative mechanisms that transform social complexity into structured coherence.

For Luhmann (2000), culture is a problematic term. He once described it as "one of the most detrimental concepts ever invented"—a residue of humanist sociology that conceals the functional differentiation of modern society. Contemporary life, he argues, is structured through autonomous subsystems, each maintaining internal order through its own code. Communication, rather than consensus, sustains this multiplicity. Meaning is produced through the triad of information, utterance, and understanding; it emerges not from shared consciousness but from recursive selection. Through communication, disturbances from the environment are stabilised as meaning (Luhmann 1995), allowing society to achieve order through reduction rather than unification.

Yet this abstraction introduces a paradox. By privileging meaning as the medium of social order, Luhmann inadvertently perpetuates the very meaning culture that defines modernity. His description of society as a self-referential system parallels what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) identifies as modernity's hypertrophy of interpretation—the tendency to translate every event into commentary, every presence into discourse. In Luhmann's schema, communication converts events into symbolic form, filtering sensation through semantics. What is gained in stability is often lost in texture; what achieves coherence risks forfeiting immediacy.

Gumbrecht's intervention exposes this loss. He distinguishes between cultures of presence—grounded in bodily immediacy—and cultures of meaning, dominated by interpretation and representation. Modernity, he argues, has shifted almost entirely toward the latter. Even digital experience, once thought to enhance connection, deepens abstraction by converting tactile life into data and commentary. For Luhmann (2012), this process is not a crisis but a systemic necessity. Every communicative selection reduces complexity while generating new alternatives. The difference between Luhmann and Gumbrecht, then, is not opposition but emphasis, between the preservation of order and the recovery of intensity.

This article brings their ideas into sustained conversation—a dialogue rarely undertaken despite their shared concern with excess, differentiation, and modern fatigue. It pursues three objectives. First, it establishes a conceptual proximity between Luhmann's systems theory and Gumbrecht's materialities of communication (Gumbrecht & Pfeiffer, 1994). Second, it extends this dialogue into the digital environment, where algorithms transform semantics into feedback loops that circulate affect. Third, it proposes a methodological synthesis—affective systems—that unites systemic observation with affective attunement. Through this lens, culture appears as an oscillation between code and sensation, between the abstraction of meaning and the immediacy of experience.

Ultimately, the argument reframes society not merely as a producer of meaning but as the living process through which meaning circulates, exhausts, and renews itself. It envisions communication as both structural and sensory, logical and emotional—a network animated by sense yet haunted by the loss of presence. The two sides are the same process, the continuous struggle of modernity to balance coherence and contact, interpretation and life.

Rethinking Culture

Niklas Luhmann's systems theory can be reinterpreted as redefining the concept of culture, moving from the humanist notion of totality to the operational logic of communication. From this perspective, culture is not a shared repository of values or symbols but a dynamic reservoir of meaning through which social systems reproduce themselves. It is an autopoietic process, detached from individual intention or collective identity (Morgner, 2024). In a functionally differentiated society, culture serves as a semantic bridge linking cognition and structure while challenging anthropological assumptions of unity. Distinct subsystems—such as law, science, and economy—maintain coherence not through consensus but through their binary codes: legal/illegal, true/false, payment/non-payment. These distinctions determine what constitutes communication within each sphere.

This reframing exposes the ideological illusion that culture forms a coherent whole. What appears as continuity or shared meaning is, in Luhmann's view, the historical residue of selections that reduce complexity through constant reactivation. Each act of communication draws on this semantic memory, reusing distinctions that stabilise expectation while adapting to contingency. The evolution of media—from writing to print, from broadcast to digital—has expanded this archive, detaching communication from locality and enabling networks, organisations, and platforms to function as self-referential environments.

Yet this analytical precision comes at a cost. As semantics circulates more freely, sociology risks losing contact with the lived world. Meaning proliferates, but the material and affective textures of experience fade. Luhmann's abstraction, for all its theoretical elegance, tends towards what Stenner (2004) calls an "alexithymic" condition—a system that can describe emotions without ever feeling them. This tension is precisely where Gumbrecht (2004) intervenes. Through his distinction between presence and meaning, he highlights modernity's drift towards interpretive saturation—a civilisation capable of representing everything but rarely of feeling. Modernity, he argues, is dominated by representation, in which immediacy is displaced by the endless reproduction of commentary. What we lose is not information but touch: the sensory pulse that grounds meaning in the body.

From this perspective, Luhmann does not abolish culture but reinvents it. Culture becomes meta-semantics—an evolving reservoir that sustains social reproduction through differentiation rather than integration (Baecker 1997). It fuels what Gumbrecht (2004) calls meaning culture: a regime of interpretive abundance that expands without closure, creating stability through ceaseless commentary. Each communicative act reduces contingency only to generate new distinctions, layering meaning upon meaning and distancing society from unmediated experience (Nassehi, 2023).

An affective systems perspective helps to bridge the analytical rigour of Luhmann's framework with the embodied, atmospheric awareness emphasised by Gumbrecht. Meaning and affect are not opposing forces but intertwined dimensions of communication. Affect, as theorised by Massumi (1995), refers to the pre-cognitive

intensities that circulate between bodies, environments, and systems—the autonomous zone of sensation that precedes representation. Even the most abstract structures resonate with tonalities of mood, rhythm, and tension. By engaging what Clough and Halley (2007) describe as the affective turn, theory can illuminate how systems not only process meaning but also vibrate with feeling—how codes generate atmospheres, amplify tensions, or destabilise coherence.

Through this integration, analysis moves beyond the binary of logic and sensation. Social systems do not simply describe the world; they feel it through circulating affects that bind communication to atmosphere. Meaning provides structure, but affect grants vitality. Luhmann's precision and Gumbrecht's presence, when read together, invite a richer understanding of culture—not as a unified tradition or semantic storehouse but as a dynamic interplay between cognitive selection and embodied resonance.

In this synthesis, culture becomes neither the domain of collective consciousness nor the mere by-product of systemic operations. It appears instead as an affective-semantic ecology—a space where meaning and mood, code and pulse, coexist and co-evolve. Such a view preserves the analytical depth of Luhmann's systems theory while recovering the sensory life that Gumbrecht reminds us theory so easily forgets.

Meaning and Affect

Reexamining Niklas Luhmann's systems theory through the lens of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's materialities of communication shifts the focus from meaning as a static construct to the dynamic conditions and forms of meaning-constitution. Luhmann's core concepts—autopoiesis, contingency, and semantics—drive communication through a continuous cycle of interpretation, structuring culture as a self-reproducing system. In contrast, Gumbrecht's emphasis on embodiment and atmosphere reintroduces the sensory and emotional dimensions often overlooked in abstract systemic models. Together, their perspectives frame culture as a dynamic interplay between systemic precision and experiential richness, balancing the cognitive processing of meaning with the visceral immediacy of presence.

This synthesis unfolds through three interrelated movements. The first builds on Luhmann's conception of semantics as a thematic reservoir through which systems process irritations from their environment (Luhmann, 2023). Although this operation neutralises humanist understandings of culture, it simultaneously accumulates interpretive density, layering distinctions until meaning becomes saturated (Stäheli, 2012). The second aligns Luhmann's distinction between system and environment with Gumbrecht's typology of presence and meaning. The binary codes that structure communication transform contingency into commentary, reinforcing what Gumbrecht (2004) identifies as the hermeneutic dominance of modernity. The third movement situates these dynamics within the digital environment, where algorithmic architectures enact Luhmann's autopoietic logic. Metrics of engagement translate emotional intensities—fascination, outrage, fatigue—into operational feedback loops (Fuchs, 2024; Esposito, 2011). These loops exemplify how affect becomes systemic, converting sensation into signal and mood into metric.

At the methodological level, this synthesis extends Luhmann's principle of second-order observation—the observation of observers. It explores how systems not only communicate but also reflect upon their own distinctions (Luhmann, 1995b). The affective extension of this principle acknowledges that communication is never purely cognitive; it is carried by atmospheres of tone, mood, and bodily strain. Even algorithmic systems, seemingly devoid of emotion, circulate affective energies—cycles of attention, exhaustion, fascination, and outrage—that now define the digital present. In this sense, digital networks both embody and amplify Luhmann's insight that communication reproduces itself through selection, transforming external disturbances into internal operations.

This reading draws on foundational works that clarify the tension between systems theory and culture. More recent contributions, such as Nassehi's (2023) analysis of recursive communication, enrich this framework with descriptive nuance, complementing Gumbrecht's sensitivity to presence. Baecker (1997) situates culture as a contested concept within systems theory. For Parsons, it resolves double contingency. For Luhmann, it remains subordinate to meaning, the form that governs all social operations. Culture thus functions as both memory and control mechanism, distinguishing the communicable from the excluded.

Yet certain limits persist. No theoretical model can fully reproduce the immediacy that Gumbrecht evokes—the shiver of presence, the embodied intensity of attention—nor can it wholly account for the saturation of digital communication. These blind spots remind us that academic reflection itself belongs to meaning culture: every attempt to describe abstraction participates in the interpretive circuits it seeks to analyse. Systems theory, in its recursive elegance, mirrors the condition it diagnoses.

To reinterpret Luhmann's exclusion of the human not as erasure but as the genesis of meaning is to confront the ethical dimension of abstraction. Hans-Georg Moeller (2012) characterises Luhmann's antihumanism as a "sociological insult," noting how it displaces the centrality of the human subject by privileging systemic communication. Yet this displacement also cultivates reflexivity. It reveals how the pursuit of precision inevitably

estranges experience, translating immediacy into symbol. To describe the world through distinction is to lose contact even as one gains clarity. But this loss is not without value: it instils humility, a recognition that every critique remains within the same web of communication it seeks to observe. Critique thus becomes not opposition but co-evolution—a second-order oscillation that observes without claiming transcendence.

Through this atmospheric reorientation, the analytical and the affective begin to converge. Systems do not merely generate meaning; they resonate with the moods that accompany their operations. To observe these vibrations is to reach the threshold where abstraction meets life—where code breathes, falters, and briefly feels. This convergence transforms the cold mechanics of systems into a living ecology of resonance, where meaning and affect co-produce the rhythms of modern existence.

The Mood of Systems

Niklas Luhmann's concept of semantics forms the operational core of meaning culture. Through autopoiesis—the process by which communication reproduces itself through selection—interpretation thickens into ever-denser layers of sense, transforming disturbances into structured meaning. Over time, these recursive chains privilege coherence over immediacy, producing the dominance of reflection and interpretation that defines modern society. Communication, in this view, is not the transfer of content but the self-referential organisation of distinctions that stabilise meaning through repetition.

This logic processes environmental perturbations through codified structures that secure closure. Contingency—the openness of all possible alternatives—acts as the system's internal engine, generating stability through constant renewal while ensuring that order remains provisional. Yet, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2001) observes, this dynamic carries a cultural cost. As interpretation multiplies, tactile presence fades. The immediacy of contact yields to the inertia of commentary. What begins as the productive management of complexity becomes a hypertrophy of meaning—a civilisation that continually explains itself but rarely feels its own existence.

Digital media intensify this condition by translating Luhmann's communicative triad into algorithmic form. Posts and messages become information. Engagements act as utterances. Algorithmic recognition functions as understanding. Within this machinery origins dissolve into endless circulation. Visibility becomes the new measure of value while resonance (the emotional intensity of reaction) supplants truth as the guiding criterion. Outrage curiosity and fascination are converted into operational signals that sustain digital autopoiesis. Social events—from protests to scandals—are processed not as narratives of meaning but as cycles of affective response. Communication reproduces itself through attention, where each surge of feeling becomes both input and output of systemic continuation.

In this sense, digital systems embody the purest expression of Luhmann's logic: communication functioning independently of human intention yet saturated with emotion. Affect does not interrupt systemic closure; it sustains it. Every distinction—visible/invisible, relevant/irrelevant—carries tonal weight, shaping the rhythm and intensity of communication. Systems thrive on these modulations, where escalation and circulation reinforce one another. As Gumbrecht (2012) suggests, Luhmann's closure becomes a Stimmung—a mood, a world thick with meaning yet thin in contact. Even within this saturation, traces of presence remain. Each communicative loop leaves tonal residues: echoes of attention, fatigue, fascination, or desire that resist full abstraction.

An affective systems perspective renders these moods perceptible. It recognises that contingency not only produces order but also animates it, generating atmospheres that circulate alongside meaning (Baecker, 2001). Culture, seen through this lens, becomes a field of oscillation between code and tone, sense and sensation. Meaning expands through recursive selection, while mood sustains the rhythm that keeps communication alive. The stability of modern systems, therefore, depends not only on semantics but on the continuous modulation of affective tone.

In this synthesis, the systemic and the sensory no longer stand apart. Every communication, whether bureaucratic, artistic, or digital, possesses a mood. This mood is sometimes faint, sometimes feverish, but always perceptible. Meaning structures the world, yet mood gives it temperature. To understand systems, then, is not only to trace their codes but to sense their atmospheres, to hear the hum of affect that circulates beneath distinction. Systems theory thus regains its lost tactility, not by renouncing abstraction but by recognising that abstraction itself has tone, vibration, and feeling. The system thinks in meaning, but it endures in mood.

The Recursivity of Culture

Niklas Luhmann's anti-humanist project—his rejection of subject-centred sociology in favour of autopoietic closure—ironically sustains the very meaning culture it appears to critique. By replacing shared understanding with recursive interpretation, systems theory generates coherence through distinction rather than unity, producing a surplus of commentary that mirrors the interpretive excess of the humanities themselves. Every communicative act transforms contingency into structure, yet each stabilisation invites renewed reflection. Meaning reproduces itself not through resolution but through its own momentum—its compulsion to continue.

Within this dynamic, the notion of culture undergoes inversion. Instead of representing shared values or collective identity, culture becomes the distributed process through which distinctions proliferate across subsystems. What once appeared as coherence now disperses into a multiplicity of self-referential operations, each governed by its own binary code (Tække 2025). For Gumbrecht (2004), this fragmentation signals the exhaustion of meaning culture—a civilisation sustained by interpretation, critique, and commentary yet deprived of immediacy. Modernity's stability depends on this restlessness: society persists through continuous differentiation rather than integration (Luhmann 2002).

The parallel between Luhmann and Gumbrecht becomes clearest at this juncture. Both describe a civilisation propelled by excess: Luhmann through recursive differentiation, Gumbrecht through interpretive saturation. Their theories converge in irony. The system that seeks analytical precision culminates in ambiguity; the pursuit of meaning produces its own depletion. Together, they reveal modernity as both the generator of contingency and the site of its fatigue. This pattern finds its sharpest expression in the digital sphere, where abstraction and affect coexist within the same circuitry.

Digital platforms materialise this irony with remarkable fidelity. They embody Luhmann's theoretical principles in algorithmic form, converting communication into cycles of recognition and feedback. Virality replaces reflection, and visibility substitutes for value. Yet affect remains the vital energy of this machinery. Outrage, fascination, and euphoria become operational intensities—circulating moods that drive systemic continuation. Digital autopoiesis thus enacts what Luhmann theorised and Gumbrecht lamented: a culture that interprets endlessly, sustaining itself through the very fatigue it generates.

This convergence challenges method as much as it defines diagnosis. Luhmann's formalism elucidates the necessity of differentiation and the inevitability of saturation, while Gumbrecht's materialities of communication restores sensitivity to what is lost in the process. An affective systems perspective enables both to coexist, maintaining analytical rigour while attending to the expelled pulse of experience. Meaning, in this light, is not merely a stabilising mechanism but a double movement: it organises order even as it erodes presence.

To recognise this duality is not to resolve it but to inhabit it, to let explanation and attentiveness alternate like breath, sustaining tension without collapse. The irony of the cultural turn, then, lies not in failure but in excess. In seeking to account for everything, culture folds back into the systems that sustain it, generating an ecology of commentary that obscures the very immediacy it once promised. What remains is a world of meaning so abundant that it risks suffocating its own vitality, leaving us to navigate a civilisation that feels through exhaustion and thinks through repetition.

CONCLUSION

Niklas Luhmann's systems theory is often interpreted as an attempt to evacuate culture from sociological thought—a move that replaces human meaning with systemic mechanics. Yet, when read alongside Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, this apparent withdrawal reveals a deeper resonance. What Luhmann excludes as anthropological unity reappears as recursive meaning production, a process that absorbs contingency into communication and expands into an ever-widening semantic universe. Culture, in this light, does not vanish. It mutates into a network of distinctions circulating through differentiated subsystems, sustaining society through semantic overproduction rather than shared values.

Gumbrecht exposes the other side of this transformation. As interpretation multiplies, presence thins. Meaning grows denser while experience becomes elusive. His lament is not nostalgic but diagnostic. Modern culture, he suggests, has become a civilisation of commentary. From academic discourse to digital networks, the modern condition is defined by its capacity to explain, reflect, and interpret—yet rarely to touch. Luhmann provides the architecture of meaning culture; Gumbrecht restores its pulse, revealing both its exhaustion and its vitality.

The affective systems approach proposed here seeks to bring these two sensibilities into dialogue. It grants Luhmann's formalism a sensory dimension and lends Gumbrecht's materialities of communication a systemic depth. By treating affect as intrinsic to communication, this framework illuminates how code and sensation intertwine—how attention, arousal, and fatigue circulate within the structures that organise meaning. Meaning and affect thus emerge as co-generative forces: the logical and the emotional, the systemic and the sensory, evolving in mutual rhythm. Theories of differentiation, contingency, and autopoiesis gain new resonance when read as affective processes—modes not only of organisation but also of collective feeling.

This synthesis also reconfigures the task of critique. In an age where digital systems accelerate autopoiesis through cycles of virality and reaction, communication increasingly feeds upon its own momentum. Institutions, too, mirror this logic through citation, precedent, and repetition, maintaining coherence through circulation rather than reflection. Within this saturation, attention collapses into fatigue, and abundance erases depth. Yet systemic awareness need not lead to paralysis. It can foster a modest ethics of observation—a readiness to pause, to listen,

to reintroduce moments of contact within the circuits of interpretation. Silence, delay, and attunement become gestures of resistance within the hyperactive field of meaning culture.

Ethically, Luhmann's method of distinction remains indispensable yet incomplete. Its analytical precision must be tempered by sensitivity to what it cannot codify. The challenge is not to transcend the system but to find rhythm within it, to allow explanation and repose, structure and sensation, to alternate without erasing one another. To think in systems, then, is not to surrender to abstraction but to learn how complexity feels.

In the end, Luhmann maps the grammar through which culture transforms, while Gumbrecht restores the resonance that keeps it alive. Together, they reveal society as a living lattice of meaning—ordered yet restless, lucid yet longing. Returning to the sports match, we see how the sport system structures the game through win/loss distinctions, yet the raw intensity of the crowd's cheers and players' movements reclaims presence amid the calculations. To observe it is to move with its oscillations, to recognise in its excess both exhaustion and possibility, and to seek, amid the dense noise of interpretation, the fleeting and fragile return of presence.

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