

Imke Polland-Schmandt and Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

The Cultural Work of Fictions:
Trajectories of Literary Studies in the 21st Century

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In response to the ubiquity of socio-cultural fictions in public discourse and the challenges and possibilities engendered by them for society at large, this volume engages in debates on the value of fictions – both literary and cultural – and the cultural work undertaken by them. In the current situation, the Humanities increasingly find themselves in the position of having to justify not only their ‘impact’ but sometimes even their very institutional position and existence. As scholars of the study of literature and culture, we find ourselves asking how the increasingly blurred lines between fact and fiction impact the ‘traditional’ study of literary fictions.

This volume emerged from the work of the European PhDnet Literary and Cultural Studies (PhDnet) based at Justus Liebig University, Giessen, and Giessen University’s International PhD Program “Literary and Cultural Studies” (IPP). In October 2019, both international doctoral programs jointly organized the final conference concluding the three-year curriculum of the fourth cycle of the PhDnet. At this conference, international PhD students and university professors gathered to discuss various levels of the cultural work of fictions and thus paved the way for the projected volume.

Publishing the results of these discussions would not have been possible without substantial support. We give our heartfelt thanks to a wonderful team, without whose dedication this book would not exist – especially the IPP and PhDnet assistants, Lucia Toman and Silvia Casazza, who took on the lion’s share of work in repeatedly and attentively checking the articles and bibliographies. We thank Dr. Erwin Otto and the WVT team for their assistance with the checks of the manuscript and their thoroughness. Finally, we would like to extend our special thanks to the colleagues and doctoral researchers of the PhDnet and particularly the contributors to this volume, whose work and model interpretations shed light on the value of fictions, on the cultural work they engage in and with, and point towards possible trajectories of literary studies in the 21st century.

Giessen, March 2021
Imke Polland-Schmandt and Ansgar Nünning

INTRODUCING THE CULTURAL WORK OF FICTIONS: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATIONS

IMKE POLLAND-SCHMANDT AND ANSGAR NÜNNING

In the twenty-first century fiction might therefore become the most potent force on earth [...]. Hence, if we want to understand our future, cracking genomes and crunching numbers is hardly enough. We must also decipher the fictions that give meaning to the world. (Harari 2016: 151)

1. Introducing Fictions and their Cultural Work

As the historian Yuval Noah Harari observes in his bestselling book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, fictions have become ubiquitous and more significant than ever before in the media-saturated world of the 21st century. Fictions not only give meaning to our lives and the world at large, they also have great performative power and do important cultural work. Moreover, they are also powerful cultural resources of resilience although people are usually not even aware of the fictions that societies live and think by. This has become particularly obvious in our current day and age, in which a plethora of old and new media disseminate an endless flow of information, news, and stories of all kinds, and in which more and more people find it difficult to distinguish between facts and fictions, or between reliable news and ‘fake news’. Whether or not it is appropriate to call the present ‘the age of post-truth’ may be open to debate, especially given the fact that Harari certainly has a point in claiming that

[...] humans have always lived in the age of post-truth. *Homo sapiens* is a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions. Ever since the Stone Age, self-reinforcing myths have served to unite human collectives. Indeed, *Homo sapiens* conquered this planet thanks above all to the unique human ability to create and spread fictions. [...] As long as everybody believes in the same fictions, we all obey the same laws, and can thereby cooperate effectively. (Harari 2018: 233)

Following Harari’s clarion-call, this volume sets out to explore the cultural work that a broad range of literary and other fictions do and to engage in debates about the forms, functions, and value of fictions – in the plurivalent sense of literary fiction and cultural fictions that individuals and societies live by. The focus of the volume is on the performative power of fictions and on the cultural work that they do or perform, which has not received the degree of scholarly attention that this important issue arguably merits. While it may well be a truth universally acknowledged (to borrow Jane Austen’s famous opening lines of her *Pride and Prejudice* from 1813) that “fictions serve as important

ways of meaning- and sense-making” (A. Nünning 2020: 49), the actual cultural work that they do is quite difficult to fathom or gauge. In recent years, this issue has gained increasing socio-political relevance, immediacy and even urgency: In today’s society – regularly dubbed a or the ‘post-truth’ era – in which whole political agendas are built on so-called ‘alternative facts’, ‘fake news’ or ‘bullshit’ (*sensu* Harry G. Frankfurt), we are witnessing an increasing tendency to blur distinctions between fact(s) and fiction(s).

In the face of such fundamental changes in the role and function of fictions within today’s society, it comes as something of a surprise that there is relatively little academic debate and even less research on fictions despite their centrality, ubiquity, and importance in today’s media societies. In this light, the present volume intends to “put the examination of fictions onto our research agenda” (A. Nünning 2020: 49). By doing so, this collection of essays not only addresses one of the main challenges and concerns in the contemporary study of literature and culture, but also intends to strengthen its very institutional importance in the academic landscape of the 21st century.

Despite Harari’s claim quoted above that this convolution of fact and fiction in the ‘post-truth’ era is not a new state, but that humankind could rather be defined as “a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions” (2018: 233), the challenges posed by 21st-century technologies and their consumption, the resulting changes to social interaction, relations, and communication are no less pressing, questioning as they do established norms in academic work, journalism, politics, and other realms. In the context of the so-called communication or information crisis, this refers to the threat of an overpowered journalism, superseded by “a communications revolution that accelerates the spread of lies, misinformation and dubious claims” (White 2017: 14).

This ‘revolution’ stems from the unprecedented rise of the so-called ‘social media’ as well as developments in the digital sphere at large, affecting the economy of attention and our consumption practices in turn. In a powerful manifesto, Jaron Lanier, for instance, argues that social media has not only been undermining truth, but is also in the process of destroying people’s capacity for empathy (Lanier 2018: chs. 4 and 6). Lanier convincingly delineates *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, to quote the felicitous title of his essay. One of the main reasons why the study of the cultural work of fictions has become so paramount can be gleaned from one of Lanier’s many perceptive observations: “Media forms that promote truth are essential for survival, but the dominant media of our age do no such thing” (Lanier 2018: 61). What they tend to do instead is disseminate fictions of all varieties which are usually detrimental to the overarching epistemological fiction, viz. that objectivity and truth exist.

The communications revolution ushered in by digital and social media has also led to what the French literary historian Yves Citton called the recent shift “From Attention Economy to Attention Ecology” (Citton 2018: 1), and the strategic use of filter bubbles (see Pariser 2011). Aidan White, founder of the Ethical Journalism Network, goes so far as to claim that “[t]he communications revolution provides people with different ways to access information and they create their own filters for information they like or don’t like”. As a result, “[i]n times of crisis and uncertainty they turn to