

Fictions at Work: Original Takes and Future Trajectories

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Abstract:

The performative powers and cultural work of fictions have been generally neglected in the academic discourse despite their fundamental role in contemporary society. This edited volume aims at exploring the work and affordances of fictions as well as tracing new and innovative trajectories for literary studies through a collection of case studies and model interpretations.

Die Arbeit der Fiktionen: Originelle Ansätze und zukünftige Entwicklungen

German Abstract:

Im akademischen Diskurs haben die performativen Kräfte und die kulturelle Arbeit von Literatur bisher wenig Aufmerksamkeit erhalten, obwohl diese Funktionen eine grundlegende Rolle in der heutigen Gesellschaft spielen. Dieser Sammelband widmet sich dieser Forschungslücke und legt eine erkenntnisreiche Sammlung von Fallstudien und Modellinterpretationen, die neue und innovative Wege für die Literaturwissenschaft eröffnet.

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The Cultural Work of Fictions: Trajectories of Literary Studies in the 21st Century edited by Imke Polland-Schmandt and Ansgar Nünning sets out to examine the performative power of fictions and their cultural work through a collection of twelve contributions by scholars with a diverse and international background.

So far, the 21st century has been notably marked by the rise and pervasiveness of information and communications technology in our everyday life, especially in the form of social media — a contemporary *cornucopia* of different stories, news, fictions, and narratives that regularly influences and shapes our individual perception of the world revolving around us. Recent socio-political events that we have witnessed in the last few years, such as Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, Brexit, or Covid-19, all of which made extensive use of fictions, essentially blurred the line between truth and fake news, fomented waves of radical scepticism towards ‘mainstream’ media, undermined the idea of hegemonic cultural narratives, and resulted, overall, in a loss of collective shared identities.

It is precisely because of the often-overlooked importance of fictions’ performative powers and cultural work in the academic discourse that this volume highlights the necessity of deepening our understanding of their impact on reality, also tracing, through this process, new trajectories for literary studies.

The edited volume competently demonstrates the performative powers and cultural work of fictions through model interpretations and case studies. It is divided into two sections respectively entitled “The Cultural Work of Fictions: Exploring the Interfaces of Socio-Cultural and Literary Fictions” and “Fictions Engaging in Cultural Work: Potentialities of Texts and Trajectories of Literary Studies.”

The volume's first section investigates the cultural work of fictions by outlining the relationship between literary and socio-cultural fictions through a broad corpus of works, both diachronic and transnational, ranging from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Peter Weiss' autobiography of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (Frankfurt am Main 1975) to the contemporary Finnish fiction of Maarit Verronen's *Varjonainen* (Helsinki 2013). In this section, readers will find articles on the interreflexive relationship between fiction and life in Peter Hanenberg's contribution, the cognitive functions at work in the negotiation of cultural models through literary and fictional elements in Mareike Glier's article, or fictions engaging in the social work of raising awareness towards the issue of famine with an article by Daria Steiner.

The second section of the book brings to attention fictions' cultural work by exploring their affordances in search of new trajectories for literary studies in the 21st century. This section introduces another wide-ranging series of predominantly contemporary works such as Christina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (New York 2017), Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* (Toronto 2003) or Ben Marcus' *The Flame Alphabet* (New York 2014). Among the new trajectories for literary studies proposed in the volume, readers will find analyses of the connections between auditory dimensions, sound imaginations, and fictions through the contributions of Markus Huss and Dimitri Smirnov, a study on multiperspectivity as a way to represent the plurality of worldviews in fiction with Fredrik Renard, and the employment of rhizomatic trajectories as a way to decolonize literary studies in Eleonora Rapisardi's article.

In my opinion, Angela Locatelli's opening article "Fiction as Play: Theoretical and Literary Perspectives on Simulation (Embodied or Not)" is a remarkably valuable and concrete illustration of the performative powers of fictions, perfectly exemplifying the volume's objectives. She examines the concept of 'playing' through the perspectives of psychoanalytic theory, cognitive sciences, literature, and philosophy, presenting the reader with a well-crafted and organically flowing collection of extracts from Leo Tolstoj's *Childhood* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Locatelli makes use of *Playing and Reality* by English developmental psychologist Donald Winnicott to introduce the key role of playing and simulations in children's cognitive development as a way to "reach out towards a sane perception of reality and healthy relationships" (p. 24). Winnicott's claims are substantiated by emphasized extracts, correlated readings, and detailed descriptions of the mechanisms at work when approaching fictions. For instance, fictions expand our conception of reality, they help us elaborate the complexity of

different selves and identities, and furthermore promote the development of empathy in readers through the constant exposure to the many subjectivities of the characters involved in them. Locatelli's easy to follow and methodical presentation of Winnicott's concepts is, overall, a very engaging and broadening experience for anyone who might be interested in understanding the cognitive relevance of fictions for readers.

In conclusion, this edited volume is a significant point of departure for scholars interested in discovering and revealing the cultural work of fictions, promisingly following up on the potential trajectories offered by the contributors as well as their functional methodological frameworks employed. Overall, all of the different perspectives presented in the book function as worthy examples of contemporary scholarly work in literary studies, orienting both the reader who is approaching the study of fictions for the first time and established scholars interested in new trajectories to follow during their academic career.