

**Frank Zipfel**

**The Pleasures of Imagination. Aspects of Fictionality in the Poetics of the Age of Enlightenment and in Present-Day Theories of Fiction  
(Abstract)**

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Investigations into the history of the modern practice of fiction encounter a wide range of obstacles. One of the major impediments lies in the fact that former centuries have used different concepts and terms to designate or describe phenomena or ideas that we, during the last 50 years, have been dealing with under the label of fiction/ality. Therefore, it is not easy to establish whether scholars and poets of other centuries actually do talk about what we today call fiction or fictionality and, if they do, what they say about it. Moreover, even when we detect discourses or propositions that seem to deal with aspects of fictionality we have to be careful and ask whether these propositions are actually intended to talk about phenomena that belong to the realm of fiction/ality. However, if we want to gain some knowledge about the history of fiction/ality, we have no other choice than to tackle the arduous task of trying to detect similarities (and differences) between the present-day discourse on fictionality and (allegedly) related discourses of other epochs. The goal of this paper is to make a small contribution to this task.

The starting point of the paper are two observations, which also determine the approach I have chosen for my investigations. 1) In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the terms »fiction« or »fictionality« do not seem to play a significant role in the discussion of art and literature. However, some propositions of the discourse on imagination, one of the most prominent discourses of the Age of Enlightenment, seem to suggest that this discourse deals more or less explicitly with questions regarding the fictionality of literary artefacts as we conceive it today. 2) The concepts of imagination and fictionality are also closely linked in present-day theories of fiction. Naturally, the question arises how the entanglement of the concepts of fictionality and imagination can be understood in a historical perspective. Can it function as a common ground between 18<sup>th</sup>-century and present-day conceptions of fiction/ality? Is imagination still used in the same ways to explain phenomena of fictionality or have the approaches evolved over the last 250 years and if yes, then how? These kinds of questions inevitably lead to one major question: What do 18<sup>th</sup>-century and present-day conceptions of fiction/ality have in common, how much and in what ways do they differ?

For heuristic reasons, the article is subdivided according to what I consider the three salient features of today's institutional theories of fiction (i.e. theories which try to explain fictionality as an institutional practice that is determined and ruled by specific conventions): fictive utterance (aspects concerning the production of fictional texts), fictional content (aspects concerning the narrated story in fictional texts) and fictive stance (aspects concerning the reader's response to fictional texts). The article focusses on the English, French and German-speaking debates of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century and within these discourses on the most central and, therefore, for the development of the concept of fiction/ality most influential figures. These are, most notably, Madame de Staël, Voltaire, Joseph Addison, Georg Friedrich Meier, Christian

Wolff, the duo Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger as well as their adversary Johann Christoph Gottsched.

The relevance of the article for a historical approach to the theory of fiction lies in the following aspects. By means of a tentative reconstruction of some carefully chosen propositions of 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on imagination I want to show that these propositions deal in some way or other with literary phenomena and theoretical concepts that in present-day theory are addressed under the label of fiction/ality. By comparing propositions stemming from 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on imagination with some major assertions of present-day theories of fiction I try to lay bare the similarities and the differences of the respective approaches to literary fiction and its conceptualisations. One of the major questions is to what extent these similarities and differences stem from the differing theoretical paradigms that are used to explain literary phenomena in both epochs. I venture some hypotheses about the influence of the respective theoretical backgrounds on the conceptions of fictionality then and today. An even more intriguing question seems to be whether the practice of fictional storytelling as we know and conceive it today had already been established during the 18<sup>th</sup> century or whether it was only in the process of being established.

Investigations into the history of the modern practice of fiction encounter a wide range of obstacles.<sup>[1]</sup> One of the major impediments lies in the fact that former centuries have used different concepts and terms to designate or describe phenomena or ideas that we, during the last 50 years, have been dealing with under the label of fiction/ality.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, it is not easy to establish whether scholars and poets of other centuries actually do talk about what we today call fiction or fictionality and, if they do, what they say about it. Moreover, even when we detect discourses or propositions that on the surface seem to deal with aspects of fictionality we have to be careful and ask whether these propositions are actually intended to talk about phenomena that belong to the realm of fiction/ality. However, if we want to gain some knowledge about the history of fiction/ality, we have no other choice than to tackle the arduous task of trying to detect similarities (and differences) between the present-day discourse on fictionality and (allegedly) related discourses of other epochs. The goal of the present article is to make a small contribution to this task.

The starting point of my investigations are two observations, which also determine the approach I have chosen. 1) In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the terms »fiction« or »fictionality« do not seem to play a significant role in the discussion of art and literature.<sup>[3]</sup> However, some propositions of the discourse on imagination, one of the most prominent discourses of the Age of Enlightenment, seem to suggest that this discourse deals more or less explicitly with questions regarding the fictionality of literary artefacts as we conceive it today (cf., e. g., Dürbeck 1996, 26). Therefore, I want to try and tentatively reconstruct some of the implicit and explicit propositions on various aspects of fictionality that can be found in 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on imagination. 2) The concepts of imagination and fictionality are also closely linked in today's theories of fiction. Naturally, the question arises how the entanglement of the concepts of fictionality and imagination can be understood in a historical perspective. Can it function as a common ground between 18<sup>th</sup>-century and present-day conceptions of fiction/ality? Is imagination still used in the same ways to explain phenomena of fictionality or have the approaches evolved over the last 250 years and if yes, how? These kinds of questions inevitably lead to one major question: What do 18<sup>th</sup>-century and present-day conceptions of fiction/ality have in common, how much and in what ways do they differ? By comparing propositions stemming from 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on imagination with some major assertions of today's theories of fiction I want to try and give some preliminary answers to these questions. It would, however, go far beyond the scope of the present article to try and answer the mentioned questions completely and

definitively – for the simple reason that dealing with these questions involves a wide range of premises and encompasses a vast and diverse set of aspects. Still, by reconstructing what 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on imagination says about different aspects of fictionality and by comparing these propositions with corresponding aspects of today's theory of fiction I hope to lay bare some important aspects of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century understanding of fictionality and to put them in relation to 21<sup>st</sup> century views on the topic.

For heuristic reasons, I subdivide my reconstructive and comparative investigations according to what I consider the three salient features of today's institutional theories of fiction:<sup>141</sup> fictive utterance (aspects concerning the production of fictional texts), fictional content (aspects concerning the narrated story in fictional texts) and fictive stance (aspects concerning the reader's response to fictional texts).<sup>151</sup> In order to set the frame of my investigation, I begin with a very brief overview of how imagination is used and what it means in 18<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on art and literature.

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