Foreword

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With the COVID-19 pandemic reaching its two-year mark at the end of this year, it has become clear that this historic event will leave an indelible mark on terrestrial life. At the end of 2019, widely shared scepticism about the virus's potential resulted in a general inability to react adequately to its spread. This lack of political responsiveness and responsibility ushered a series of rhetorical strategies that served to engage people to fight the virus collectively and in solidarity. As an example, the foreword to our *33.1* issue *Urban Studies* considered how the pandemic reshaped perceptions and understanding of urban space as many were confined to their homes, while both the public and private spheres were remediated by, among other things, social distancing. *Urban Studies* is thus one response to the material consequences of COVID-19's forced recalibration of the public and private spheres, and the ways in which we might intellectually and artistically engage with them.

The fight against COVID-19, characterised by a militant approach to this rather volatile phenomenon, emblematises a war rhetoric that was dynamically interrogated in the foreword to our *33.2* issue titled

War, Literature and Law. In what followed in the rest of the issue, literary scholars from various backgrounds discursively engaged with the language of warfare and legislation, and showed how these two coincide, intersect and create tensions in the literary domain. Debates pertaining to the (formal) representation of oppression, violence and inequality were cast in a critical roster that shows how creative and legal language can both exacerbate and mitigate structural and material inequities in the context of warfare.

One particularly painful recurring observation about COVID-19 is the great asymmetry in the degree to which different communities and cultures are struck by the pandemic's multidimensional effects. Many of these issues and disparities were and still are addressed through protests, demonstrations and other activist endeavours to varying degrees of success. *FRAME*'s *34.1* issue *Literature and Activism* was inspired by global activist developments and focused on how literature can engage language in politically destabilising, revolutionising and subversive ways. By emphasising that most activist movements are historically ongoing and have been magnified by COVID-19 rather than called to life under its pressure, *Literature and Activism* aimed to contribute to a breeding ground where the activist potential of language and literature can be critically employed and assessed.

Running as a *leitmotiv* through the previous three issues' forewords are the pandemic's effects on different domains of human life. COVID-19 was taken as a case in point for the types of artistic engagement that such a disrupting event instils. Where *33.1, 33.2* and *34.1* respectively zoomed in on the spatial, juridico-political and communal planes of experience, the current issue aims to further concretise this line of inquiry and bring it down to the level of the individual mind. Whereas the pandemic conspicuously affects societies as a whole, its less obvious individual-psychological repercussions are equally real and problematic. This development has intensified the steadily growing public discussions about such phenomena as mental health, urging creative approaches to representing and discussing mental health issues, and in extension, the mind in general.

We find one such creative approach in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*, which portrays a post-apocalyptic world where a strain of the "Georgia Flu" (18) has caused a pandemic, leading to the demise of eighty percent of the world population. Reading this book, published in 2014, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is both an eerily familiar and a surprisingly hopeful experience. Unlike many post-apocalyptic narratives in popular culture, *Station Eleven* centres the importance of art and culture for humanity, even in a world thrown into disarray.

The focus is on the Travelling Symphony, a group of actors and musicians who travel through the American wastelands and perform music and Shakespearian plays in derailed towns. To their surprise, they find that modern plays are less popular than Shakespeare classics: "People want what's best about the world" (Mandel 38). The Symphony's motto, taken not from Shakespeare but from *Star Trek*, is: "survival is insufficient" (58). It emphasises the importance of culture for humanity and its survival, suggesting that it is culture that makes life worth living. Unlike many other texts in this genre, *Station Eleven* does not focus on the individual's heroism, but on the much more subtle social engagement of a troupe of actors and musicians, of storytellers. In this work, cultural and social engagement thus show to revitalise a human condition that is driven to the point of collapse.

In addition to creative approaches, one could turn to a theoretical discussion of the relation between literature and the mental realm. For example, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Gilles Deleuze observes about the relation between health, illness and literature that

> the writer as such is not a patient but a physician, the physician of himself and of the world. The world is the set of symptoms whose illness merges with man. Literature then appears as an enterprise of health: not that the writer would necessarily be in good health […], but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard from things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becomings that a dominant and substantial health would render impossible. (3)

This multi-perspectival view on the medico-metaphorical role that literature has rhymes perfectly with Deleuze's earlier claim from the same essay that "[w]riting is inseparable from becoming" (1). For Deleuze, writing in the broadest sense is an existential condition, the very process of becoming, rather than mere recording. Moreover, literature can in this light be read as an act of (self-)diagnosis. Coming to terms with those things "whose passage exhausts" us then interdepends on literature's ability to identify matters that elude bodies and minds that are taken as normative and healthy. In trying to avoid reductionist Western-centric conceptions of writing in its dominant form as textual script, Deleuze here offers a view of literature as a function of the human condition that mediates lived experience with the fantastic and impalpable, and then substantiates it. Therefore, writing can also be regarded as a therapeutic and reparative act, as a means of bringing into being the unidentifiable, in order to be able to process that which is unknown and scary. This bridging of the interaction between writing (conceived in the broad sense; as more than typing and hand-writing) and the fundamental mysteries of the human mind in its multiplicity will be centrally explored throughout this issue.

However, the main purpose of *Writing the Mind* is not to limit discussions of the mind to mere artistic representation or theoretical analysis. Rather, we also aim to emphasise the concrete material effects of mental conditions and the ways in which these are stigmatised. This stigmatisation, too, has very serious political, social and cultural effects. An example would be the dominance of a text such as the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, which provides a general overview of all mental disorders as they figure in medicine in the Global North.

This manual is the principal source on diagnosing *and* labelling various mental conditions, but holds little space for individual lived experience. In addition to being a prescriptive text that describes the minimum requirements for being considered mentally "ill," it also defines patients' identities by the parameters it sets itself, thus contributing to the discursive and socio-political stigmatisation of mental illnesses. However, the *DSM* has not only become symbolically known as the

"bible of psychiatry" (Vanheule x). It also has tangible effects in financial and legislative spheres. Here in the Netherlands, for example, insurance coverage of treatments is reliant upon *DSM*-classification. In addition, it also informs investments in mental health care, and the accessibility of different forms of care (Vanheule xi). The *DSM* thus exemplifies the material consequences a text such as this one can have on people's lives.

In a world that is thoroughly defined by the material, *FRAME*'s current issue examines the ways in which literature can represent the mind and its different manifestations in all its complexity. Aiming to democratise understandings of the human psyche, *Writing the Mind* encourages transmedial explorations of the mental realm, while being acutely aware of the danger of dualism that inheres in employing these concepts. For that reason, this issue envisions fruitful thought of the mind to be equally mindful of the material and physical reality that people's mental lives are inextricably bound to.

Our first article is "'I'm full of gaps': Depression in Florian Zeller's *The Son*," by Ben Screech. Here, Screech highlights how Florian Zeller's play *The Son* (2019) explores depression—a medical illness that is hard to capture in linguistic form due to the various social and discursive barriers surrounding it—through linguistic ambivalence and cryptic dialogue. The play tells the story of a son who suffers from depression-like symptoms and traces how his surroundings respond to, and are affected by, his condition. According to Screech, the vague and ambiguous language that is used to express the interactions between the depressed son and his surroundings demonstrates the tremendous impact that social taboos, bourgeois norms and the behaviour of parents can have on the ways in which children and their parents deal with mental health issues. Through a close reading of *The Son*, Screech uncovers how the play's various characters are affected by their own inability to express and discuss depression.

Engaging with trauma and postmemory in graphic memoirs, Marybeth Ragsdale-Richards' "Matrifocal (Dis)ease and (Re)membering in Amy Kurzweil's *Flying Couch*" explores how Kurzweil's graphic memoir functions as a postmemorial project, "a bounded space

Kurzweil engineers that allows for a productive, continuous transmission of loss" (38). According to Ragsdale-Richards, *Flying Couch* illustrates the relationship of third-generation survivors to the Shoah, weaving together Kurzweil's multifaceted identity as an emerging graphic novelist, a granddaughter of a Shoah-survivor and the daughter of a second-generation survivor. Ragsdale-Richards illustrates how the graphic memoir outlines different times and places side-by-side, providing an alternative syntax to speak where language and words would fail. Drawing on trauma literary studies, family systems theory and comics scholarship, Ragsdale-Richards proposes that in the face of the difficult task of articulating trauma into cohesive narrative, Kurzweil designs a space in which her grandmother's memory, testimony and present-day family relationships are placed alongside each other. As such, the article gives insight into the ways the medium of the graphic memoir can give remembering a form, as well as help to engage in processes of "irreconcilable mourning" (42).

The first article in our masterclass section is written by our former editor-in-chief Maico Mariën. In "Drawing the Mind: Breaking the Discourse on Mental Health," Mariën considers how comics can add to the existing mental health discourse by nuancing and challenging traditional iconography in his reading of Joshua W. Cotter's *Driven By Lemons*. This comic is the unedited diary that Cotter kept shortly after being diagnosed with Bipolar II, a mental disorder that causes those diagnosed with it to alternate between hypomanic and depressive episodes. The comic follows Cotter as he seems to suffer a breakdown, is admitted to a psychiatric hospital and finally, as he is discharged. Mariën uses Jason Helm's method of looking *at* and looking *through* to highlight the disruptive qualities of *Driven by Lemons*, to show how it nuances and challenges existing discourse on Bipolar II. Through this reading, Mariën argues that comics are particularly well-suited for disruptive readings as they foreground meaning through their visual elements. In doing so, the reader is tasked with simultaneously making sense of individual panels and the meaning of these panels in relation to the page and comic at large, resulting in an act of looking *at* and looking *through*.

Closing this issue's masterclass section is Julia Neugarten, who in "*Brittle*: Re-thinking Narratives of Disordered Eating through Fanfiction" analyses how a piece of *Supernatural* fanfiction engages with cultural narratives around the ways in which masculinity and eating disorders relate to femininity and control. She mainly builds on Susan Bordo's work on the body as it figures in Western culture; separated from the mind and thus posing a threat to our desire for control, as well as Emily Contois' conception of the masculine ideal of 'dude masculinity'. Neugarten argues that *Brittle* introduces the topic of eating disorders as a way of exploring a character's canonical struggle, without reducing it to a metaphor. By situating the topic of disordered eating in the magical world of *Supernatural*, *Brittle* makes it accessible to readers, while also keeping it at a safe distance from them. At the same time, *Brittle* emphasises the individuality and complexity of experiences with disordered eating. In this way, Neugarten demonstrates the power of fanfiction as a tool for diving deep into emotional tensions or taboos that the canon fails to address.

Our miscellaneous section is initiated by an interview with contemporary life writing scholar Anna Poletti. Current editors-in-chief Kelly van der Meulen and Kees Müller went into conversation with Poletti about their most recent monograph titled *Stories of the Self: Life Writing After the Book*. In this book, Poletti explores the ways in which the self is constituted transmedially, while emphasising the political and cultural significance and importance of "personal storytelling" (4). How do we communicate our selves to others? What means do we employ to do so? And what types of methodologies and strategies do we adopt when using various media other than traditional forms of writing to articulate who we are? In this interview, Poletti expands upon some of their book's most fundamental insights and elaborates on the responsibility of bringing thought of the self back to matter and media in an era that is defined by digital identities.

Concluding the wonderful contributions to this issue, you will find two book reviews by Vincenzo Di Mino. The first review grapples with Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh's *Omnicide: Mania, Fatality, and the Future-in-Deliriums*, a fragmentary anthology of poetic derangements of Middle

Eastern origins that uncover the ways in which mania communicates with and grows into an extreme wish for annihilation. In the second review, Di Mino discusses Mark Fisher's *Postcapitalist Desire*, which critically engages with the relationship between desire and capitalism, outlining the project he left unfinished due to his sudden death in 2017.

In choosing *Writing the Mind* as *34.2*'s theme, we hope to show the importance of text in any shape or form for our consideration of the mind. We want to emphasize that we have chosen "*Writing the Mind*" rather than something akin to *"Literature and Mental Health,"* as we want to broaden understandings of the human psyche, which includes more than mental health and mental disorders alone. When we speak about "the mind," we take it to mean both one's individual psychology as well as the socio-political and cultural dimensions that affect all of us. We hope that this issue of *FRAME* adds to and embellishes our understanding of the mind as both a cultural artifact and social product.

Trigger warning: The editorial board of FRAME is cognizant of the fact that certain aspects of the materials that our contributors discuss may be difficult to read fore some of our readers. Therefor, if any of the following topics might elicit unwanted responses while reading, we advise you to either tread carefully, or altogether refrain from reading the article(s) in question: depression, mental healthcare and state or institutional bureaucracy, domestic trauma, Holocaust trauma, transgenerational trauma, disordered eating, hypomania and bipolar disorder.

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