

# Foreword

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On “Crosseyed and Painless,” from the Talking Heads’ seminal album *Remain in Light* (1980), ever-frantic frontman David Byrne narrates the story of a paranoid man who feels he has lost his grip on reality. Half-way through the song—against a dynamic, polyrhythmic backdrop of congas, cowbells, staccato funk guitar and synth blips—Byrne launches into a jittery rap verse:

Facts are simple and facts are straight/Facts are lazy and  
facts are late/Facts all come with points of view/Facts don’t  
do what I want them to/Facts just twist the truth around/  
Facts are living turned inside out/Facts are getting the best  
of them/Facts are nothing on the face of things. (Talking  
Heads, “Crosseyed and Painless”)

The predicament of Byrne’s paranoiac, who says that he “feel[s] like an accident” is very much our own. In our age, every (in)sane person with a keyboard and Internet access can voice his opinion, “fake news” and “fil-

ter bubbles” have become staples of popular discourse, the current leaders of the United States and Russia reject generally accepted scientific claims about global warming, and extremist groups deliberately spread disinformation to further their agenda. In an interview in January 2017, con(wo)man Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to Donald Trump and the human equivalent of George Orwell’s propaganda pig Squealer, coined the instantly classic term “alternative facts,” elegantly defined by *Urban Dictionary* as “a fancy way to say bullshit” (n. pag.). As sociologist Liesbet van Zoonen had already argued in 2012, social media, algorithm-based websites, along with a right-wing assault on journalistic integrity, have drastically changed the way we process information and what we believe to be true. She coined the term “I-pistemology” to capture the “contemporary cultural process in which people from all walks of life have come to suspect the knowledge coming from official institutions and experts, and have replaced it with the truth coming from their own individual experience and opinions” (56). In the I-pistemological era, insisting on “Fact, fact, fact!,” like Charles Dickens’ infamous utilitarian school master Mr. Gradgrind, has become increasingly hard to do (14).

Against this geopolitical backdrop, this issue of *Frame* explores the relationship between fact and fiction, drawing on literary studies, media studies, gender studies, and cultural memory. The relationship between fact and fiction has been a central topic for these areas of study ever since their inception: whether we are talking about the literary text’s ambiguous ontological status, the trustworthiness of mediated information, experimentation with gender identities, or the reliability of testimonies. Several hundred years before the word “fiction” took on its current meaning, Plato famously banished poets from his ideal state, because their lies posed a threat to the body politic. By contrast, his less fiction-phobic pupil Aristotle argued that fiction—in his case tragedies—helped people to achieve *catharsis*, so that they could “cleanse their emotions” and cope with daily life. Any obvious irony aside—Plato’s dialogues are literary masterpieces, while Aristotle wrote dry scientific tracts—this tension between fiction and fact, as articulated by the two Greek philosophers, in one way or another underlies every article in the present volume.

This issue opens with Maria Boletsi's "The Revenge of Fiction in New Languages of Protest: Holograms, Post-Truth, and the Literary Uncanny," in which she explores the role of the fictional in recent hologram demonstrations. Whereas post-truth rhetoric appeals to what comedian Stephen Colbert calls "truthiness," "things that a person claims to know intuitively or 'from the gut' without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts" ("Truthiness," n. pag.), this new form of protest attempts to circumvent the opposition between the material and the immaterial and uses fiction for political purposes. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's notion of the "spectre," Boletsi claims that "hologram protests foste[r] a spectral space, in which the hierarchical opposition between fiction (as non-serious, trivial) and reality [is] redrawn." The holograms are shown in public spaces in which protesters are frequently not permitted to stage their protests. By fictionalizing and spectralizing themselves as holograms, protestors can be present and absent at the same time. Paradoxically, by appealing to fiction's supposed triviality, their act of resistance becomes all the more dangerous, since it circumvents what Derrida calls "ontopology": an attempt on the part of the state to maintain control by designating who can be present or absent from the political order (102). Sometimes claiming "It is just fiction!," just will not do.

In "The Fiction of Identity: Drag, Affect, Genres, Facticity," Anna Poletti takes us into the domain of gender studies and popular culture. As she argues, following gender studies scholars such as Judith Butler and Judith/Jack Halberstam, that identity is not something immutable, a set of empirical facts that make up one's being-in-the-world, but a practice, always already inscribed in a power/knowledge nexus. Identity is both personal and impersonal, writes Poletti: our individual embodied identity "structures our individual passage through the social field and the physical world," while at other times "the generic nature of our identity is foregrounded," for instance when being identified to belong to a specific group leads to violence or neglect. Through an analysis of cult series *RuPaul's Drag Race*, starring African-American drag queen RuPaul Charles, Poletti studies how drag as an artform challenges the impersonality of identity categories, calls into question heteronormative and racialized discourses of identity, and disrupts the naturalized rela-

tionship between sex and gender. Borrowing from James Phelan, Poletti argues that drag (“a big f-you to male-dominated culture,” according to RuPaul) utilizes “fictionality,” an act in which someone “intentionally signals his or her use of a discursive invention to someone else for some purpose(s).” Again, downplaying drag’s subversiveness by claiming that the elaborate experimentation with personas and gender identities is “just fiction,” just will not do. Poletti concludes that “[d]rag is particularly well-placed, at this cultural and political moment, to hold open gender as a fact-producing discourse for critical reflection, while never fully exceeding the logic it seeks to disrupt.”

Media scholar Grant Bollmer delves into the relation between fact and fiction in digital culture in “The Sense of Connection, or, Complex Narratives and the Aesthetics of Truth.” He discusses complex networked forms of narrative across different media—ranging from narratively complicated television shows such as *The Wire* or *Lost* (and the fan forums that supplement them), to Alternate Reality Games, to theatrical performances. The article goes on to draw a connection between these forms of storytelling and other paranoid forms of knowledge or conspiracies, giving examples such as the QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracy theories, which have gone on to have an evident effect on contemporary politics. Bollmer insists that “the relationship of reading into the QAnon conspiracy is functionally indistinguishable from the forensic fandom of *Lost*,” given that “there is an analogous structure of interpretation.” Extending this analogy further, he argues that distinctions between fact and fiction constitute attempts to differentiate between forms of knowledge, and are therefore ultimately aesthetic.

In “In Formation,” Doro Wiese—drawing on scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Paul Virilio, and Gilles Deleuze—investigates how information influences human perception. Through an analysis of the sculpture *Moule* by artist Anna Lena Grau, Wiese investigates how art works “can counter the process by which knowledge about (events in) the world is mediated more and more through media and less through our bodily perceptions.” Information, she writes, “has not duration, but has an actuality: it affects, but does not give us time to analyse media effects which act upon our bodies; it is ostensibly objective but leaves

out important components from events as it avoids rendering subjective experiences.” As Benjamin argued, information “lays claim to prompt verifiability” (“The Storyteller” 89) and “does not survive the moment in which it was new” (90). News media report on *Erlebnisse*, events one merely lives through, while looking at artistic objects such as *Moule* is an *Erfahrung*, a singular sensory experience, as he would put it (“On Some Motifs” 163). Or, to discuss the matter in a Deleuzian and Spinozist way: media users nowadays are constantly bombarded with affections, but lack the time necessary to develop affects. By contrast, writes Wiese, a work of art “cannot exhaust itself in the speed of the present moment. [...] It activates past experiences, present perceptions, and visions of the future, which are not separated and can mutually reinforce each other.”

In her essay “Fake News, Cognitive Pollution and Environmental Awareness,” media scholar Elena Lamberti poses the provocative question whether fake news is really that new. Is fake news not just an updated form of mythmaking or “mythmaking 2.0,” as she calls it? Drawing on the Toronto School of Communication, and especially on its figurehead Marshall McLuhan, she argues that digital storytelling has moved from the margin to the mainstream: “No longer intrinsically new, no longer a counter-environment, digital storytelling has become natural to us because our mind works in a non-linear way.” According to Lamberti, fake news “cannot be framed simply as bad journalism,” but “must be investigated also as a more complex form of collective narrative precisely because mobile and social media have turned each of us not only into a writer, but also into a witness and critic in real time.” In contrast to traditional mythmaking—which seeks to provide a society with a collective foundation through the act of narration—mythmaking 2.0, as exemplified by fake news, is “literature that becomes obsolete in an instant.” Lamberti argues that fake news shapes the reality we live in and requires writers to create counter-environments in a world that is saturated with false information. Moreover, it requires us to read ironically, that is, to realize that we “both inhabit and contribute to the consolidation of mythmaking 2.0.”

In “‘Back in A World I Understood’: On True War Stories about Women in Vietnam,” Jantine Broek close-reads Tim O’Brien’s “Sweet-

heart of the Song Tra Bong,” included in the collection *The Things They Carried* (1990), and Le Ly Hayslip’s autobiography *Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989), one of the first books about the war by a Vietnamese author that was commercially successful in the USA. As Broek points out, most Vietnam War narratives feature supernatural and hallucinatory elements and are told from a male perspective by so-called “grunts,” who try to make their way through the jungle in search of “Charlie” (the Vietcong). Narratives by women and people of color, however, are often neglected and narratives told by those who did not participate in the war deemed less trustworthy than those by veterans. O’Brien and Hayslip’s texts both centre on female narrators, feature ghosts (an important part of Vietnamese culture), and blur the line between fact and fiction. Following O’Brien, who argues that “it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” because narrators of war stories “lose [their] sense of the definite, [and] hence [their] sense of truth itself,” Broek argues that “true war stories are measured by their emotional impact rather than absolute facts,” and are fundamentally about the change in identity they portray. While O’Brien’s story depicts the transformation of an American woman who loses her mind in the jungle and “goes native,” Hayslip’s autobiography serves as a counterpoint to male-dominated, American-centric war narratives, and calls into question gendered conceptions of what counts as a “true war story.”

In the masterclass section, Lauren Hoogen Stoevenbeld close-reads Yugoslav novelist Danilo Kiš’ short stories “A Tomb for Boris Davidovich” and “The Encyclopedia of the Dead,” respectively a story about the attempt to piece back together the life of the titular fictional hero of the Russian Revolution and an—at first sight—accurate biographical sketch, which—plot twist!—turns out to be a dream of the narrator. Read alongside each other, the stories both contradict and supplement each other. They critique standard historiography and the ways in which communist regimes attempted to manipulate peoples’ perception of the past and the present by spreading what we now call “fake news” and by creatively using Orwellian “memory holes.” Following cultural memory studies scholars Ann Rigney and Astrid Erll and historian

Hayden White, Hoogen Stoevenbeld argues that literary texts can help us to understand the past in ways that traditional historiography is unable to, and as such are not just a second-rate form of history but are singular historical artefacts.

All the articles in *Frame* 31.2 call into question robust epistemological claims to truth and argue that fiction is not just a triviality, but a subversive cultural form whose effects on that nebulous thing we call “the real world” cannot be downplayed. In the so-called “post-truth” era, literary studies, media studies, gender studies, and cultural memory studies occupy a privileged position. By drawing attention to the performative effect of fiction while questioning essentialist post-truth claims, these articles can perhaps lead to a more nuanced understanding of the terms fact and fiction. On behalf of the editorial board, I would like to thank all our contributors and hope you, our readers, will enjoy this issue. “Don’t you miss it, don’t you miss it!” (Talking Heads, “Born Under Punches”).

## Works Cited

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