

## **No Society**

Curtin 118

Panel Chair: Andrew Kincaid

### **Theodore Martin (UC-Irvine)**

“Antisocial: A Literary History”

This is, in crude terms, a talk about novels that don't like other people. It is also an attempt to argue that such novels may be more than misanthropic expressions of refusal or withdrawal. How, this talk asks, have different forms of antisociality been central to the social imagination of the novel? And how might different types of literary disconnection from the social world produce different understandings of how society holds together?

The novel is at once a profoundly social art form and a peculiarly antisocial one. Historians and theorists of the novel have long insisted on the novel's defining social uses: its instruction in empathy; its teaching of economic credibility; its articulation of invisible community. Yet there is a well-known antisocial side to the novel as well: it narrates public life, yet shores up private property; it depicts social interaction, yet affirms the primacy of interiority; it teaches us empathy, but only in sessions of private reading; most of all, it guarantees its own special social status only by inventing a category—fiction—that is defined first and foremost as the formal opposite of social reality. These constitutive antisocial elements—the solitude of reading, the centrality of interiority, and the non-social status of fiction itself—suggest a kind of shadow history of the modern novel. This a history in which the novel form turns out to be less a lesson in empathy or identification than a way of grappling with a series of escalating contradictions that lie at the heart of both social life and literary form: the contradiction between ourselves and other people; between the existence of other people and the abstraction of society; and between the society we live in and the fictions we read to escape it.

This talk explores how the antisocial tendencies of the novel come to the fore starting in the 1950s—allowing us to periodize a long postwar present marked by the steady dissolution of social welfare and by the declining social value of the very notion of society or the common good. Tracing the postwar antisocial novel from Patricia Highsmith and Richard Wright to Zadie Smith and Paul Beatty, I show how literature records and responds to the shift from Cold War liberalism to neoliberalism, or from state power to state withdrawal. In the literary response to the weakening of society and the waning of the state, we see how the contemporary desire to escape from other people represents not the

triumph of antisociality but an attempt to reconceptualize the impersonal yet urgently necessary fiction of society as such.

**Tero Karppi** (SUNY Buffalo)

“Disconnect. Contesting Social Media”

Facebook engages 1.5 billion users every day, and yet if we read their financial documents, the biggest threat the company faces is users saying no and deciding to leave the platform. Disconnection threatens the business models of social media. Disconnection in relation to social media sites has been previously discussed in the context of users and their uses and non-uses of the sites and services [1]. In this paper, which is based on my book manuscript, I frame a platform centric approach to disconnection drawing on the works of Brian Massumi [2] and Tony Sampson [3]. For social media businesses users disconnecting is a problem, which needs to be solved. In lieu of a solution, social media platforms focus on building and monetizing on a relation they define as user engagement. What user engagement is and enables is elaborated in this paper through three small case studies focusing on automated participation, deactivating ones Facebook account, and Facebook’s dead user policies. The paper argues that while user participation, a Web 2.0 specific way to understand social media users, relies on the agency and activity of users, user engagement gives us an alternative perspective where users are constantly activated and incorporated by the platform.

[1] Ben Light, *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites* (Palgrave, 2014)

[2] Brian Massumi, *Power at the End of Economy* (Duke, 2014).

[3] Tony Sampson, *Virality. Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

**Kieran Aarons** (DePaul University)

“The Destituent Pledge”

The coming politics must not simply to topple this or that decaying legal-political regime, but twist-free of the need of foundations *per se*. What is needed is to think the logical premises of an *irreversible* break with the occidental logic of state and economy, sovereignty and governance—in other words, the conditions under which life can become ungovernable and *hold out*.

Confronted by the breathtaking widespread de-legitimation of democratic institutions and ideals—to be welcomed, provided we can think our way through the other side—, this paper proposes the concept of a “destituent pledge”. Philosophically, I aim to think a form of non-sovereign *contact* between ourselves, one another and the world. Politically, the paper aims to contextualize the widespread presence of pledges, oaths and vows in contemporary anti-infrastructural struggles. Since not all pledges are destituent, nor does all destitution take the form of a pledge, at issue is only one possible gesture through which to think political task confronting us.

Destitution is neither the “no” of pure refusal nor the “yes” of the alternative. For Agamben, destituent politics have a two-fold frame: they must make a partisan use of human inoperativity, i.e. ‘exhibit the void’ at the heart of governance, while ‘immediately inaugurating a new reality’<sup>[1]</sup>. In other words, they must generate *consistency* without *constituency*. Key here is to think a reorganization of factual experience around a ‘caesura’ capable, on the one hand, of *nullifying* the governmental bond, while at the same time allowing a new type of ‘contact’ to emerge within this relationless space. Taking as a model various pledges that have occurred in the context of anti-infrastructural struggles<sup>[2]</sup>, I argue these partisan pledges should be read as the elaboration of such a destituent potential. By severing the two moments of the classical Hobbesian theory of the social contract (‘association’ and ‘subjection’), the ‘pact of association’ is mobilized *against* subjection rather than for it, resulting in a partisan pledge that *expresses* (rather than signifies) our embeddedness in a substantial world, exposing the void of relation *between* us and the juridical order.

<sup>[1]</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford, 2015), 272, 269.

<sup>[2]</sup> To cite but two recent examples: in 2014, warriors of the Lakota Nation pledged to be ‘dead or in prison before [they] allow the keystone XL pipeline’; and in October of last year,

40,000 people converged on an anti-airport land occupation known as La ZAD ('zone to defend'), planted wooden staffs in the earth, and pledged to retrieve and wield them should the autonomous territory come under attack by the State.