KEYNOTE ADDRESS

John Frow (University of Sydney)

"Prefaces to the Novel"

In its early history the novel frequently deploys paratextual material to orient generic expectations, and in particular to navigate the often complex relation between the real and the fictional. My paper looks at a number of prefaces in order to explore how they negotiate the ontological status of novelistic fiction.

PANELS

John Attridge (UNSW)

“Everyday Life and the Art of Fiction in Henry James’s Memoirs”

Henry James was the most influential nineteenth-century exponent of the idea that fiction was an art, mastery of which required not Romantic inspiration but hard-won technical proficiency. Attempts like James’s to talk up the technical rigour of the novel as a discipline tended to find themselves caught in the pincers of a double-bind, since James’s claims for the highly specialized nature of fictional artistry were accompanied by an insistence on the novel’s traditional versatility and eclecticism as a genre. In other words, the art of fiction was constructed as a specialized occupation for which any form of narrowness was, paradoxically, fatal: novelists were specialist generalists or, as this paper will argue, specialists in everyday life. The main focus of this paper is James’s two completed works of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). A principal theme of James’s memoirs is the account of his own education as an artist, in which James describes how his path towards professional authorship required, not specialization in any particular sphere of experience or body of learning, but rather the assiduous avoidance of what his father called “narrowing”. My paper situates this theme in the context of broader cultural assumptions about art as a refuge from industrial reification, and argues that James’s memoirs frame the education of the novelist as a paradoxical process of specializing in everyday life.
Arka Chattopadhyay (University of Western Sydney)

"'Before the door that opens on my story': Beckett and the Real-it-y of Narrative as Failure"

This paper will explore the Beckettian logic of narrative failure in The Trilogy by examining the ‘ill said’ stories, progressively ‘worsened’ with every act of narration. Reading these obsessive-compulsive moments of narrative as reiterated failure, the paper will attempt to shed light on the various techniques as well as implications of this experiment, ranging from freezing a narrative into stasis to pushing it towards the furthest limits of speculation and hypothesis and from forcing the narrative to revolve around its tangential exterior to disclosing its constructedness through deterministic narratorial intrusions. Instead of dwelling on metafictionality or the way in which discursivity interrupts narrative or even the generic nature of Beckett’s work where the anonymity of the general envelopes the ‘demented particulars’ the paper will analyze the actual ‘stories’ to underscore the paradoxical status of his narrative impulse where the nothingness of stories meets the necessity of storytelling. The drift of these narrations relocates storytelling from the subjective space of the ‘I’ to the opacity of language as a field of the Other and finally into the originary as well as the terminal silence that defines narrative. The rest of the paper will deal with the consequences of Beckett’s assault on the realistic narrative logic of the novel by connecting it with the aporetic narrative logic that emerges from Lacanian psychoanalysis with its emphasis on the Real as opposed to realism. Finally how this speaks to the transitional narrative cultures of Modernism and Postmodernism is of interest to this paper.

Sarah Comyn (University of Melbourne)

"The Compulsion to Consume: Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes"

In a 2003 work entitled Bullion the German photographer Thomas Demand foregrounds the malleability of the category of value, as the realms of paper and gold collide in a close-up photograph that depicts a “Midas-like stack of gold bars” (Demand and Van Wyk 63). With his customary wit, Demand makes an implicit commentary on the nature of value and representation: the stacked bars of gold that fill the frame of the photographic image are made from paper, and, following Demand’s modus operandi, shortly after the photograph that forms the art piece has been taken the ‘bullion’ is destroyed. The concept of accurate representation, therefore, becomes in this work perpetually deferred, pointing to the ephemerality of value. The questions raised by these eternal twins, value and representation, and their influence on the history and development of homo economicus in economic theory and the Anglo-American novel form part of what this paper aims to address through a focus on Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes. Mrs. Dalloway, positioned as it is between the end of the First World War and the ascendancy of Keynesianism from the second half of the 1930s, provides an opportunity to examine consumer impulses and anti-consumption as embodying the oppositional solutions proposed to the impending stagnation of the British economy. Woolf and Keynes’ aesthetic and moral interventions in literary and economic writings, respectively, engage the reader in the tensions characterising the interactions between the individual and the community, the
macro and the micro, the static and the dynamic. The attempt to combine the broken and the integrated extends itself to the narratorial and explanatory ambitions of Woolf’s novels and Keynes’ economic theories alike and their attempts to integrate socio-political and formalist categories.

**Hannah Courtney (UNSW)**

"Two Parts of a Whole: the Novel and the Paratext"

Novels have often been linked with a number of common traits which supposedly define the genre. These features of the novel range from macro aspects, such as fictionality, narrativity, and even book length, to more micro aspects, such as third person access to characters’ minds (often deemed the definable, exclusive trait of narrative fiction, of which the novel is the most common form). However, authors have always broken rules, and these supposedly definitive aspects can be found in a number of works which cross the boundaries of the novel and other genres, particularly across the fact/fiction divide. As such, it is impossible to absolutely define a work as either a novel or another form without recourse to its context. Novels can so closely resemble other genres, such as memoir, and so the narrative itself cannot definitively convey its own generic status. It is the paratext, then – both within and without the book as artifact – which thus guides this classification.

This paper will use narrative cases which breach the novel/non-novel divide in order to explore how it is the paratext which determines the generic categorisation of the work. The readerly reactions to works of fictionalised memoir and the autobiographical hoax demonstrate that the paratext is an integral part of the contemporary reading experience – we cannot seek to separate text from paratext, and thus we cannot hope to define ‘the novel’ without including the paratext as an intrinsic, even determining, part of that definition.

**Guy Davidson (University of Woolongong)**

“Affect, Style, and Narrative in James Baldwin”

In a 1960 essay, James Baldwin states that “All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique.” For Baldwin, this confession entailed the admission early on in his career of his own sexual queerness at a time when such admissions were courageous and dangerous. However, this confession, courageous as it was, was also “oblique” in that it was embedded within a novel—*Giovanni’s Room* (1956). The oblique confessions of *Giovanni’s Room* and subsequent Baldwin novels might alternatively be described by Benjamin Widiss’s term “obscure invitations,” which he uses to refer to veiled solicitations in modernist and postmodernist texts “to commune with the author.” But unlike the generally ludic and self-conscious novels and films Widiss treats, Baldwin’s novels develop the mode of obscure invitation as a form of “self-protection,” a motivation that Widiss notes but does not discuss in detail. Baldwin tended to confine discussion of same-sexuality to his novels, whereas race was a consistent concern of all of his writing (novels, essays, plays, and so on). In the era of the open secret, before gay liberation, when professions of homosexuality by public
figures made them prime targets for condemnation and ridicule, self-protective strategies are perfectly understandable and in some ways Baldwin’s obscuring of his homoerotic orientation through fictionalization is unremarkable. But I will suggest that the particular forms of obscurity deployed by Baldwin, which importantly include obscurity of style and narration, have suggestive resonances for queer theory and for the theory of the novel.

Paul Dawson (UNSW)

“Prefaces, Digressions, and Intrusions: Authorial Commentary in the Novel”

Authorial commentary is typically characterized by both critics and general readers as an interruption to the narrative that disrupts the illusion of truth to varying degrees. This paper will assess what assumptions about narrative fiction underpin these claims and investigate the historically shifting theories of novelistic form that accompany them. In particular, it will explore the relation between prefatorial statements and authorial commentary, and focus on commentary that addresses its own function.

In the early history of the novel, authorial commentary was presented and received in line with classical rhetorical theories of digression, but by the end of the nineteenth century the more common term was ‘intrusion’. But intrusion into what? The paper will categorize the different types and functions of authorial intrusion and trace the various ways they have been employed by authors to both establish and challenge the novel’s generic status in relation to other narrative forms.

Emma Jenkins (UNSW)

“The Success of Failure: Experimental Novels and Post-Identity Politics”

The focus of this paper will be the thematic and structural success of the ‘failure’ to adhere to conventions in Chris Kraus’ Aliens & Anorexia (2000), and Sheila Heti’s How Should A Person Be? (2010). Kraus, a literary and art critic, and Heti, a playwright, both fail to produce their own craft and fail to adhere to gender conventions, yet each utilises the self-reflexive performance of these failures as the structural and thematic core of their own novels. These apparent failures are the means by which each expose, critique and weaken the conventions of literature and identity politics that seek to silence and erase liminal subjects such as themselves. The texts’ interdisciplinary nature has seen them widely classified as new narrative, autofiction, and fictocriticism, yet, significantly, they are subtitled ‘A Novel’ and ‘A Novel From Life’, respectively. These are experimental novels that cling to narrative structure as their organising core. In doing so, they are able to maintain their legibility while dismantling and critiquing the conventions which seek to restrict their singular narrative accounts. By utilising multi-vocal and multi-structural techniques, Kraus and Heti challenge conventional methods of categorisation. In this sense, I argue that the novel, analogical to the protagonists Kraus and Heti, isn’t so much ‘dead’ or erased as post-identity and now able to inhabit its own liminal space.
Roslyn Jolly (UNSW)

"Henry James’s ‘The Novel in The Ring and the Book’"

Henry James’s Browning centenary essay, ‘The Novel in The Ring and the Book’ (1912), is a classic expression of what this symposium’s call for papers identifies as the novel’s capacity ‘to both draw upon and distinguish itself from other narrative genres’. James muses upon an imagined novel that might be ‘yielded up’ by placing Browning’s sprawling poetic narrative ‘under some fine strong economy of prose treatment’. Such a treatment, he argues, would require the author to select and sacrifice source material in order to uncover the narrative’s most vital form; it would reveal the importance of finding a centre of consciousness to function as ‘a point of control’ over the story; and it would illustrate the need for novelists to enlist their readers’ ‘imaginative collaboration’ in order to make a fiction ‘real’ or ‘vivid’.

James’s discussion of how Browning’s long poem might be transformed into a prose fiction leads him to delineate what are for him the characterizing elements of the novel as a genre distinct from other narrative genres: a discernible but flexible relation to historical facts, the use of narrative technique as a means of formal discipline, and allowance for a dynamic relation between author and reader. Distinguishing his novelistic vision from the ‘so vast and so essentially gothic a structure’ that is The Ring and the Book, James reveals his sense of the novel as a genre that is fundamentally ‘modern’ and ‘dramatic’, and that aims for formal perfection in its use of a consistent narrative method.

Elizabeth King (UNSW)

“The Novel in the Narrative: Critiquing Convention from the Inside Out in Flann O’Brien’s At Swim-Two-Birds”

Taking up three novels created – in one way or another – by Irish author Brian O’Nolan, this paper will consider the possibilities of interrogating narrative conventions and the value systems of the literary marketplace from within fictional forms. The first of these texts is not a novel, but rather an idea for one conceived by O’Nolan and now existing only in summary form in the memoirs of his friend and literary accomplice, Niall Sheridan. According to Sheridan, Children of Destiny was to be ‘The Great Irish Novel’, a bestselling saga for the masses that would be ‘manufactured’ rather than written via a process of plundering other literary works and adding liberal amounts of sex and violence. The second text is O’Nolan’s debut novel, At Swim-Two-Birds, written under the pseudonym of Flann O’Brien and published in 1939. The final book is a fictitious novel-in-process; the project of Dermot Trellis, an author-character created by the unnamed student narrator of O’Nolan/O’Brien’s At Swim-Two-Birds.

An analysis of the interconnections between these texts; one hypothetical, one actual and one fictional, raises questions surrounding both the overlap – and perhaps even antagonism – that exists between conventional novelistic realism and the kind of overt display of fictionality usually associated with postmodernity and metafiction. The novel within O’Nolan’s novel provides a starting point from which to consider the ways that depicting writers in the act of literary creation within fiction can enable a
reflection on, and often a critique of, both the literary field and the novel as a genre from the inside out.

Christopher Kremmer (UNSW)

"From Dialectics to Dialogue: Bakhtin, White and the ‘moorings’ of Fiction and History"

Scholars have noted the ‘remarkable proliferation’ of historical fiction in the postmodern period, and Hayden White has described the Neo-Historical Novel as ‘the dominant genre and mode of postmodernist writing’. This recent explicit acknowledgment of the status of neo-historical fiction raises questions about the long estrangement between the discourses of history and the historical novel since 19th century historians began defining their discipline as a social science. Historians remain preoccupied with time-space specific, ‘observable or perceivable’ events, while imaginative writers also engage hypothetical and invented ones. However, this article argues that the theoretical grounds for a vigorous interdisciplinary dialogue between fictional and non-fictional historiography are apparent in the work of White and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory of the novel and concepts of dialogism and polyphony are now much discussed in scholarly discourse. By remaining open to the historical referent, rejecting structuralism’s closure in the text, and acknowledging the subjective tendencies in all forms of historiography, White and Bakhtin make new and exciting conversations possible in an environment in which history and fiction can be defined as competing but complimentary discourses.

Ella Mudie (UNSW)

"The Novel as Readymade: Michèle Bernstein and the Critique of Separation"

In 1960, the Paris-based Situationist Michèle Bernstein published the first instalment in a pair of readymade novels that playfully knocked-off the popular literary genres of the post war era and which the author subsequently dismissed as jokes. Principally concerned with Bernstein’s first book, Tous les chevaux du roi /All the King’s Horses, this paper explores the avant-garde’s problematising of the genre of the novel and in particular their critique of the relationship between the production and reception of novels and the conditions of “separation,” or alienation, reinforced by commodity capitalism. By adopting a readymade plot, I argue that Bernstein rejects the novel’s privileged claim to novelty in order to present, rather, a heavily ironic document of the unexceptional everyday. In this way, I want to suggest that the performative rehearsal of boredom and banality in All the King’s Horses not only implies an ambivalent attitude toward the radical claims of the libertine fiction that the novel appropriates but also provokes consideration, in a far broader sense, of the limits of narrative fiction as critique.
Lizzie Nixon (The Ohio State University)

“The Depersonalized Narrator Across Media”

This paper revisits questions of how the narrator function operates across media by examining different types of effects created by the depersonalized narrator in cinema and in the novel. In terms of unreliability, for example, critics working in film and the novel tend to take as given that the presence of some sort of personalized narrator is necessary. Film critics argue that unreliability can be discovered in cases where the characters narrate portions of the film, as Seymour Chatman suggests, or can be seen in cases where the cinematic narrator focalizes through unreliable characters, a position Emily Anderson prefers. Unreliability in the novel is also said to require a homodiegetic narrator—or at least a “personalized” narrator. I argue that emotional unreliability is common to both novels and films and does not require personalized narration in the form of a homodiegetic narrator of focalizing through characters or characters narrating portions of film. Exploring the possibilities of emotional unreliability, as well as other forms of depersonalized narration, allows us to expand our understanding of how unreliability can manifest itself on screen as well as in print in addition to discovering additional dimensions of how the narrator functions across media.

Michael Damon Reid (Singapore University of Technology and Design)

"The Omnivore's Dilemma: the Novel and the Darwinization of Words"

This paper considers some of the implications for conceiving of the novel as the omnivorous genre, the form that contends with, devours, and incorporates rival genres. Competition and combination, form and morphology, cross fertilisation and hybridisation: so recurrent are the biological motifs from Bakhtin and Russian Formalism on to more recent attempts (Moretti, Boyd, and many others) that try to link natural with aesthetic selection that something of the strangeness of the analogy has become blunted. In what ways are aesthetic systems analogous to evolving biological species? In what ways are critical systems analogous to evolving biological species? The first question is too vast for a short talk; it is the second question I shall take up, first by giving a brief reception history of genre theory's use of biological thinking; and then end by considering contemporary appeals that yoke Darwin and biology together with the aesthetic.

Mark Steven (UNSW)

“End Here.”

This paper skips ahead to the final pages of several canonical modernist novels. It looks to their endings as the staging ground for a dialectical antagonism between fictional narrative space and the embedded voices of narration. For James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and others, the novel’s ending presents a moment when the narrated interior and the narrative world find themselves locked into a chiasmus of mutual transfiguration, whose implications extend into
making the modernist novel structurally unique from its eighteenth and nineteenth century forebears and its postmodern successors. The paper will survey several modernist endings to argue that, when it comes to endings, the modernist novel is not necessarily tarrying with the literary-historical “end” or “death” of its own form. Rather, the argument will be that modernist endings exemplify the form’s aspiration to a kind of immortality, or what David Trotter would call the “will to literature.”

Justin Wolfers (University of Western Sydney)

"Self-narrativisation and Hyper-mediated Subjectivity in Ben Lerner's 10:04"

Ben Lerner's 10:04 is a work of fiction that seamlessly integrates art essay, faux-autobiography, poetry, and direct address to the reader into its narrative. Particularly through the use of humour, irony, and questions of plagiarism and self-plagiarism, these elements enliven the reading experience, working toward an affect of heightened awareness and attentiveness, in which the reader sees the world – and the novel – as multiplicitous and irreducible to one narrative mode. Lerner's many selves (author, writer, narrator, historical author) all happily intersect and intertwine, creating a work which enjoys and thrives upon the irreconcilability and multiplicity of its voicing. This paper will enact these hybridities, proposing 10:04 as an example of a narrative form in which many diverse modes of authorship can exist concurrently, intricately, enjoyably.