

The London Review of Books, the Birkbeck  
Institute for the Humanities and the Birkbeck  
Institute for Social Research  
present

# CRITICAL THOUGHT IN TIMES OF ATTRITION

a university weekend

11th-12th May 2019

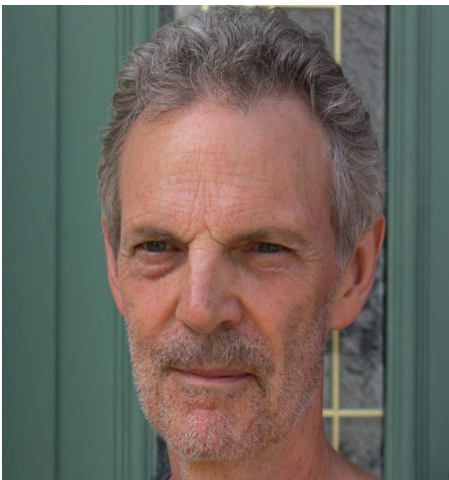
Birkbeck College, Bloomsbury, London

## JEREMY HARDING

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### 'OTHER PEOPLE'S DIFFICULTY'

Journalism wouldn't have much to tell us if it took no interest in difficulty. But what happens to reportage and analysis when it's faced with the greatest difficulty of the greatest number (war, hunger, climate change, mass displacement and dispossession)? Does it become a grandiose disaster narrative, in which the hardships of tragic, powerless populations are set out for the consideration of equally powerless audiences? Or are there less ostentatious ways to make sense of other people's difficulty, weighing fragile kinds of human agency against the larger forces which it's at a loss to influence? Jeremy Harding talks about his work for the London Review of Books and invites participants to discuss these questions with him.



*Jeremy Harding is a contributing editor at the London Review of Books. He is the author of *Small Wars, Small Mercies: Journeys in Africa's Disputed Nations* and *The Uninvited: Refugees at the Rich Man's Gate*, a report on clandestine migrants and asylum seekers, originally published in the LRB. *The Uninvited* won the Martha Gellhorn Award for Journalism in 2001. His translations of Rimbaud's poetry were published by Penguin in 2004. His most recent books include the memoir *Mother Country* and *Border Vigils: Keeping Migrants Out of the Rich World*.*

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## ROSEMARY HILL

### 'ENGLAND CHANGING HANDS'

So ran The Times's headline in May 1919 and it might be a headline now. How and why did the Victorians create a 'property market' and how did it get us where we are today?

*Rosemary Hill is a writer, historian and independent scholar with an interest in biography, material culture and the connections between them. She has written two prize-winning books: *God's Architect*, a life of the Gothic Revival architect, A W N Pugin and *Stonehenge*, a history of one of Britain's greatest and least understood monuments. Her last book, *Unicorn: The Poetry of Angela Carter* was published in 2015. She is currently completing a study of antiquarianism in the Romantic period. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the Society of Antiquaries, a member of English Heritage's Blue Plaques Panel, a trustee of the Pugin Society and a Quondam fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.*



## JOHN LANCHESTER

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### 'ON BEING DISRUPTED: THE ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF PUBLISHING AND JOURNALISM SINCE THE MID-80S.'

'Disruption' is a popular idea in the world of economics and technology, where it is seen as something to be celebrated. Less attention is given to the inhabitants of the world that is being disrupted. One of the first areas of white-collar work to be extensively disrupted by technology is the world of writing, both in newspaper and in book form. I propose to discuss the impact of changes in that world since the Thatcher government, and the consequences both for cultural workers and for society more generally.



*John Lanchester is the author of five novels, most recently *The Wall*, and three works of non-fiction. He is a contributing editor for the LRB.*

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## ESTHER LESLIE

### 'WORK IN THE AGE OF THE DEVICE'

Devices do work for us, but we work for them, and never more so than now, when they and we are never really 'off'. Esther Leslie will present thoughts on contemporary work in the light of our technologies, specifically our liquid crystal devices. She presents a genealogy of the device – from its first emergence as a name for apportioned property to its dominance in and of the present, when the device captures our gestures and hears all our words. Our devices make possible the data-crunching algorithms in the service of corporate and government intelligences. What gestures, what words, have come into being for our new work-selves, and might yet be devised to critique them?

*Esther Leslie is Professor of Political Aesthetics and Co-Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, at Birkbeck, University of London. Her books include various studies and translations of Walter Benjamin, as well as *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant Garde* (Verso, 2002); *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (Reaktion, 2005); *Derelicts: Thought Worms from the Wreckage* (Unkant, 2014), *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (Reaktion, 2016) and *Deeper in the Pyramid* (with Melanie Jackson: Banner Repeater, 2018)*





## GAIL LEWIS

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### 'THINKING OUTSIDE THE FRAME: TRAUMA, RACE AND GENDER.'

The question of trauma has become central to the academic discussion of history, sexuality and race. In this talk Gail Lewis will consider how the present climate shatters our pre-existing frames of thought while making consideration of trauma in relation to gender and race more urgent.



*Gail Lewis is a psychotherapist who teaches in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck College. Her political subjectivity was formed in the intensities of black feminist and anti-racist struggle and through a socialist, anti-imperialist lens. She was a member of the Brixton Black Women's Group and one of the founder members of the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent. Formerly editor of European Journal of Women's Studies and Feminist Review, she is the author of Race, Gender and Social Policy: encounters in a Postcolonial society, editor of 'Rethinking Social Policy', and has also written for Psychology of Women.*

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## JAMES MEEK

### 'IMAGINING THE IMAGINED: EXPLORING THE WORLD-PICTURE OF THE ENGLISH IN THE 21ST CENTURY'

James Meek talks about his interest in personal representations of such traditionally specialist-defined realms as history, economics and sociology. Drawing on a decade of conversations for his England reportage in the London Review of Books, Meek asks if the most troublesome rift in modern democracies like Britain's is not so much between graduates and the 'less-educated' as between personal and academic representations of the wider, not-experienced, world.

*James Meek is a novelist and journalist and a contributing editor to the London Review of Books. Born in London, he grew up in Scotland and lived for most of the 1990s in Ukraine and Russia, returning to London in 1999. He is the author of two books of short stories and six novels, including the Ondaatje prize-winning *The People's Act of Love*. His second collection of LRB essays, *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining*, has just been published. The first, *Private Island*, won the Orwell Prize.*



## JACQUELINE ROSE

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### **`POLITICAL PROTEST ON CAMPUS: SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS TAKE THE LEAD`**

Over the past few years, South African university students have erupted in protest against the persisting racial inequalities of the post-apartheid era demanding free education, the removal of all monuments to apartheid, and a transformation of learning. In her talk, Jacqueline Rose will draw on the archives of the protests and the insights of psychoanalysis that have been central to her thought to argue that the students were acting as the barometer of historical and psychic truth. She will then turn to key recent works of imaginative fiction from across the world to show how they engage with the persistence of historical trauma. What light does literature cast on some of the most intractable dilemmas of our time?



*Jacqueline Rose writes on feminism, psychoanalysis, literature, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and South Africa. Her most recent books are *Women in Dark Times*, 2014, and *Mothers – an essay on love and cruelty* which was published last year. The Jacqueline Rose Reader was published in 2011. A regular writer for *The London Review of Books*, she is a co-founder of *Independent Jewish Voices in the UK* and a Fellow of the *British Academy*. In 2018, she was one of the judges of the *Man Booker prize for literary fiction*. She is *Co-Director and Professor of Humanities at Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities*.*

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## MARINA WARNER

### **`NO MAN'S LAND - NO, NOR WOMAN'S NEITHER: IS THERE A REFUGE IN WORDS?`**

Marina Warner will explore ideas of place as established by imagination and narrative. She will ask if the rich storytelling traditions of literature can offer ways of confronting and resisting contemporary displacement and stigma.

*Marina Warner is a writer of fiction, cultural history, and criticism. Her study of the *Arabian Nights*, *Stranger Magic* (2011) won a *National Book Critics Circle Award*, the *Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism* and a *Sheikh Zayed Book Award*; in 2015, she was awarded the *Holberg Prize in the Arts and Humanities* and was made *DBE*. She is *Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck College*, *President of the Royal Society of Literature*, a *Professorial Research Fellow of SOAS*, and an *Honorary Fellow of the Royal Academy*. Her current work includes an 'unreliable memoir' of her childhood in *Cairo*, and a study of *Sanctuary*.*





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