

In Conversation with Virginia Woolf and other Modernists  
From Modernism to Contemporary Revisions of the *Art* of conversation.

October 16-17, 2025, Aix-Marseille Université, Aix-en-Provence



**Confirmed Keynote Speakers:**

Professor David James, University of Birmingham, UK

Professor Christine Reynier, University Paul Valéry-Montpellier 3, France

**Organising committee:** Nicolas Pierre Boileau (Aix-Marseille Université, LERMA, member of SEAC and SEW), Marie Hédon (Aix-Marseille Université, LERMA), Jean-Christophe Murat (Aix-Marseille Université, LERMA, member of SEAC) and Maryam Thirriard (Université de Toulon, BABEL, member of SEAC and SEW)

**Call for papers:**

Celebrating the centenary of the publication of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the 2025 SEAC and SEW conference<sup>[1]</sup> hosted in Aix-en-Provence addresses the influence of modernist experimentations on British authors of the post-1930s era—with a particular focus on the often neglected 1930-1960 period and beyond, into the contemporary era. More particularly, delegates will be invited to reflect upon the way in which Woolf's representation of conversation in, through and out of fiction has made a long-lasting imprint on British authors and visual artists. The idea is to move away from the many classifying frames accounting for the works produced between modernism and post-modernism (such as inter-, high/low, new materialism, new Victorianism, etc.). We seek to address how dialogues, conversations and debates in fiction, poetry and art can be seen as more than a stylistic trope, but rather as sites of negotiation between various discourses.

Contrary to the often-caricatured vision of Woolf's texts as overwhelmingly focused on internal thoughts, Woolf's interest in dialogues, spoken words and conversation is central to her poetics and political stance (Mellet 2021; Lucey 2022). It may come as a surprise to address the art of conversation by foregrounding *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel that is best remembered for its modernist stream-of-consciousness technique, its emphasis on subjective experience and, among other major themes, the representations of thought processes, time and memory. However, the novel opens with "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself", seemingly reporting an interaction that has not taken place within the space of fiction and will not be responded to, thereby simultaneously continuing and interrupting a conversation<sup>[2]</sup>. We are interested in the difference between conversation and dialogue, one a means of communication and exchange, the other a technical way of representing spoken words. This dialectic goes beyond Woolf's own appraisal and use of dialogue; it goes beyond her

own conception of conversation. We are looking for reflections on the nature of the relation/absence of relation between the two poles of this dialectics.

For example, Woolf steers the dialogue away from questions of communication or the exchange of information, so as to highlight the many functions of conversation within the novel, as can be seen a few lines after the first sentence, in which the character tries to piece back her past through previous fragments of an exchange she seems to remember – the significance of this fragmented conversation having no apparent connection to its topic, which may have been about cabbages.Ä

The conference will seek to address the structural, social and political functions of conversation in texts, but also in art. In particular, one may wish to challenge the idea that small things said in small talk should only be an effect of reality or verisimilitude, a naturalistic trope as Rancière suggests. It may even be, in some extreme cases such as Scottish writer James Kelman’s focus on the mundane and the everyday, an artistic as well as a political decision. If the fragmentation and dislocation of conversation in modernism have been shown to reveal the instability and unreliability in the relations between things said and things meant, has this in turn had any effect on the way in which later writers have used, refused or changed their own approach to the writing of conversation and/or dialogue? Here Michael Lucey’s and Elizabeth Aslop’s recent works on conversation help to broaden the scope of these reflections and extend them to include most modernist writers. Both argue that the representation of spoken words is the blind spot of literary criticism for the study of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century works of art. They suggest that modernism has promoted conversation as a place of equivocation and polyglossia, and in that respect their works converge with Laurent Mellet’s exploration of conversation as central to the politics of the Edwardian novel.

The place Woolf and other canonical “high modernists” hold among British writers of the century remains to be revised, not simply in terms of intertextual influence but in the way her/ their work, in breaking free from the ‘mimetic enterprise’ (Aslop, 2) of the novel, has led writers and artists after them to negotiate and revise this model throughout the rest of the century. It seems that Woolf also set an example for subsequent writers to consider that each text was part of a more general conversation on literature itself (“How Should One Read a Book?”). In that respect, dialogues and ways of representing conversation may also be regarded as sites of innovations and experimentations beyond the codified norms they seem to perpetuate, innovations that may not always have been envisaged in connection with the illustrious model.

Doesn’t the act / art of conversation produce new ways of thinking about influences between writers and artists that might be less anxiety-ridden than Bloom’s? Conversation ‘and subconversation’ (a term coined by Sarraute in an article in which she praises Henry Green’s work) are ‘moment[[s]] of encounter when spoken conversation interacts with silent conversationÄ thus creating a particularly intense emotion.’ (Reynier 2009, 67) Critics have thus pointed out the place of conversation and dialogue in and as formalistic experimentations: ‘the appeal of the dialogue may have arisen from the difficulties and doubts that arose about the writing of literary history and literary criticism, and the related desire to create a more dialogical method of airing critical judgments’ (Marcus). It was also an attempt to ‘reawaken classical aesthetic discourse, and in particular the Platonic and Socratic dialogue.’ (Marcus) The art of conversation therefore connects with the understanding of how society functions, how forms of care and affects are spoken, talked about, produced and misunderstood, how, in a word, culture is circulated and shaped.

By creating a space for a “utopian interlocution” (Maingueneau), Woolf and other modernists can be said to have found a singular way of working towards some form of ‘assemblage’, of interacting with writers, of working towards creating a space for communication, consensus or dissensus that is conducive to connection. Did the next generation, the non-modernist voices, the voices hailing from all kinds of geographical, social and ideological spaces, feed into this approach? Following up on Helen Southworth’s contribution to the parallels between Woolf and Colette, or Naomi Toth’s study of Woolf and Sarraute, we propose to re-open and expand the conversation that Woolf sought to have, and most of the time was having *in absentia*, by looking at how British writers, but also visual artists, in turn, converse with her *art* of conversation<sup>[3]</sup>.

This could help us think about how works of literature, but also and more generally works of art, continue each other in a sort of ongoing conversation of their own. It is remarkable that the books of the 1930-1960s seem mostly to have been compared to the canonical works of their predecessors, with little to no consideration for how writers of that generation conversed with the previous generation – one thinks of Margaret Drabble, Graham Greene, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Rebecca West, Patrick Hamilton, Elizabeth Bowen, Rose Macaulay, Malcolm Lowry, Anthony Powell, as well as more canonical voices such as W.H. Auden, Jean Rhys, Stevie Smith, Malcolm Lowry, Edward Upward, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Angus Wilson and Kingsley Amis. However, in the light of this new narrative, should we not also reassess the often assumed, less often worked upon connections with modernist techniques of writers such as Will Self, Ian McEwan, Jonathan Coe, Alan Hollinghurst, Doris Lessing, Olivia Laing, Zadie Smith, Ali Smith and Bernadine Evaristo.

The conference invites papers that trace a new genealogy between modernist aesthetics (not limited to Woolf, but Woolf is taken here as a paradigmatic example), the “forgotten generation” of the 1930-60s, and the postmodern era and beyond, by looking at the way conversation is used in fiction and artistic creation, as well as writing about fiction and the arts. How is Woolf’s interest in intersubjective, rather than intra-subjective, relations, reflected in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century British literature and artistic creation? How is conversation used to suggest that subjectivity is the product of constant negotiations with others, founded in an intersubjective experience? One thinks of Ali Smith’s *Summer* in which Ashley has deliberately decided to stop speaking, producing among others a renewed wish for interaction with her, forcing them to envisage a non-verbal conversation. One also thinks of recent works focused solely on conversation, such as Cusk’s *Kudos* trilogy, or McGregor’s uninterrupted yet failed conversation in *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*. As care studies, health studies and other approaches have successfully pointed out, conversation, which is often deemed to be the site of empathy and interconnection, deserves a closer study of its own, as it resonates with the contemporary need to reimagine sites of interaction that are not fraught, endangering or confrontational.

Papers could focus on the following themes (but the list is not restrictive):

- Discussion, (heated) debate, overtly political and polemical conversations. The political diatribe and the art of convers(at)ion
- Intimacy, bonds and affects through character’s words, what they say and what they don’t.
- The persistence of the stylistic trope of the dialogue and its many shapes, distortions, twists.
- Conversation vs dialogue
- Art as a conversation without dialogue

- Linguistic and stylistic analyses of conversation
  - Legacies and re-appropriation in the 1930s-60s
  - Voice, voices, how fiction makes us hear; how fiction materializes the voice of others, the voices heard and the voices forgotten.
  - The influence of modernism on contemporary gender politics, and the redefinition of modernism through the prism of gender theories
  - Conversation and genre, conversation and generic boundaries, conversation and fragmentation.
  - Voices and vocality: how is voice represented, shown, made present or haunting, forgotten and retrieved; how fiction and the arts resort to new devices that capture or transmit voices;
  - Intertextual and trans-textual vocality is also epitomized by Woolf's *Orlando* or *The Waves* and can be thought about when dealing with performance, questions of adaptation and rewritings, etc.
  - Conversations across form (performance; happenings, music, rhyming poetry)
  - Poetry and the intrasubjective/intersubjective dialectic
  - Fictional voices and the real in the C21
  - Texting, messaging, emailing and the notion of relation/conversation

This conference will be held at the Maison de la Recherche, Aix-Marseille University, on October 16th and 17th, 2025. Proposals of 400 words, together with a short biographical note, should be sent to Nicolas Boileau ([nicolas.boileau@univ-amu.fr](mailto:nicolas.boileau@univ-amu.fr)) by May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

A selection of peer-reviewed papers will be published in the SEAC's journal *Études britanniques contemporaines*: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/>

Aslop, Elizabeth. *Making Conversation in Modernist Fiction*, The Ohio State UP, 2019.

Briggs, Julia. "The Conversation behind the Conversation: Speaking the Unspeakable in Virginia Woolf," *Études anglaises*, 58.1 (2005): 6-14.

Bernard, Catherine. *Essai sur Mrs Dalloway*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006.

Bernard, Catherine. *Matière à réflexion: du corps politique dans la littérature et les arts visuels contemporains*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2018.

Besnault, Anne. *Woolf's Unwritten Histories: Conversations with the Nineteenth Century*. Routledge, 2021.

Dowson, Jane (ed.). *Women's Writing, 1945-1960, After the Deluge*, London: Palgrave, 2003.

Dubino, Jeanne, Paulina Pajak, Catherine H. Hollis et alii. *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Global culture*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Favre, Valérie. *Virginia Woolf et ses petites sœurs*, PhD., 2020.

Ferrebe, Alice. *Literature of the 1950s and 1960s*, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012.

Greer, Erin. "A Many-Sided Substance": The Philosophy of Conversation in Woolf, Russell, and Kant", *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3, *Modernist miscommunication and Modernist*

*communities* (Spring 2017), 1-17.

James, David. *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, Cambridge UP, 2012.

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James, David. *Modernism and Close Reading*, Oxford UP, 2020.

Latham, Monica. Rigeade, Anne-Laure and Marie, Caroline (eds.). *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature*, Routledge, 2021.

Latham, Monica. *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives*, Routledge, 2022.

Lucey, Michael. *What Proust Heard and the Ethnography of Talk*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022.

Maingueneau, Dominique. *L'énonciation littéraire* 1 et 2, Armand Colin, 1995.

MacKay, Marina and Lindsey Stonebridge. *British Fiction after Modernism, the novel at Mid-century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Marcus, Laura. "Virginia Woolf and the Art of the Novel" in Davison-Pégon and Smith Di Biasio, *Contemporary Woolf / Woolf contemporaine*, Presses universitaires de Montpellier, 2014, 15-32.

Mellet, Laurent. *Des Édouardiens aux Modernistes : les alternatives libérales du roman anglais*. Montpellier, PUM, 2021.

Pégon-Davison, Claire and Anne-Marie Smith-Di Biasio. *Contemporary Woolf/ Woolf contemporaine*, Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2014.

Rancière, Jacques. *Le Fil perdu, Essais sur la fiction moderne*. Paris : La fabrique éditions, 2014.

Reynier, Christine. *The Ethics of the Short Story*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Reynier, Christine (ed.). *Conversation in Virginia Woolf's Work*, Montpellier, numéro special d'*Études britanniques contemporaines*, 2005.

Southworth, Helen, *The Intersecting Realities of Virginia Woolf and Colette*, Ohio State University Press, 2004.

Toth, Naomi, *L'écriture vive, Woolf et Sarraute: Une autre phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016.

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[1] Société d'études anglaises contemporaines (SEAC) : [http://www.laseac.fr/?page\\_id=32](http://www.laseac.fr/?page_id=32) ; Société d'études woolfiennes (SEW) : <https://etudes-woolfiennes.org>

[2] This will be further explored by Woolf in other texts, such as *A Room of One's Own* which starts with 'But', literally in the middle of a conversation.

[3] Recent academic events have looked at the ways in which for example a young generation of women psychoanalysts related to the Bloomsbury group and Woolf in particular, prompting us to look at similar unexplored relations with writers as diverse as Golding, Murdoch and Plath, Auden and Hughes, including novelists, playwrights and poets.