

Critical Conversations 2022–2023

In partnership with Analog Sea, an offline publisher of printed books, we're delighted to announce the fourth season of Critical Conversations, an expert-led discussion series that allows Library members to ponder the most important issues of our time. This season, we will reflect on how to lead a contemplative, vital, and unmediated life in an ever-faster digital world. We will discuss questions such as: What do we gain from disconnecting, and how can we do it? How can we sharpen our senses and redirect our attention in order to change our thoughts and actions? And most of all, how best can we live within and contribute to contemporary society in a rich, nuanced and meaningful way?

Some details:

The 2022–2023 series will unfold over nine sessions, from November 2022 to July 2023. Conversations will begin at 7 pm CET and run for ninety minutes, in person, at the Library; technology of all description is happily forbidden. Each participant will receive copies of all four *Analog Sea Review* volumes published so far. Course reading and discussion will for the most part be based on work published in *The Analog Sea Review*. Jonathan Simons, founding editor of Analog Sea, will begin each meeting with some opening remarks, before guiding a group discussion.

About Critical Conversations:

Whether in France or America, debate is central to healthy democracy. Critical Conversations encourages both disagreement and agreement through thinking, talking, reading, and actively participating in community. Since the series' inception in 2020, we have tackled race in America, the climate crisis, and migration. Across seasons, participants have challenged themselves, their peers, and the world in which we live.

Please write to Emilie Biggs at biggs@americanlibraryinparis.org with any questions or thoughts.

Groundwork:

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset writes that agitation dazzles, blinds, and compels us to act mechanically, like “frenetic sleepwalkers.” To address the perils of today

is, first of all, to name them. Whether distraction, compulsion, and isolation, or noise, bright light, and convenience, during meetings one, two, and three, we will identify and begin to understand the snares of today's increasingly digital world.

Meeting One

Introduction

Thursday, November 17, 2022

Meeting Two

Overstimulated in a Hyperstimulated World

Thursday, December 8, 2022

“We have to accept that technological products are not neutral,” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*. How did we get here? And what have we lost along the way?

Readings:

Jonathan Simons, “Letter to the New Generation,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 1–3.

Oliver Sacks, “The Machine Stops,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 61–67.

Urs Hafner, “The Audible Breath,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, pp. 27–29.

Geert Lovink, “Alone Together,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 86.

Pope Francis, “The Technocratic Paradigm,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 70–73.

Meeting Three

The Society of the Spectacle

Thursday, January 12, 2023

In *La société du spectacle* [*The Society of the Spectacle*] (1967), French philosopher and avant-gardist Guy Debord describes an image-saturated world overtaken by the market economy.

He writes, “The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. . . . The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires.”

While each individual image, video, or viral tweet we consume seems innocuous enough, and indeed may bring us joy and “connectivity,” is there a point when, as Alan Watts posits, we begin to mistake the menu for the meal? What challenges or limitations does a society of spectacle inflict on its members? And, without abandoning all digital interaction, how can individuals and communities invite more direct experience into their lives while keeping the spectacle at bay?

Readings:

Kevin Fox Gotham, “Back to the Spectacle,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 89–99.

Alan Watts, “Eating Menus,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 100.

Peter Mettler, “Picture of Light,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 16.

Janos Tedeschi, “Interview with Peter Mettler,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 17–36.

David Foster Wallace, “A Basic Problem,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 85.

Wim Wenders, “A Language of Images,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 51.

Susan Sontag, “The Photographic Experience,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 52.

Byung-Chul Han, “Natural Beauty,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 125–126.

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Meeting Four

Wonderment

Thursday, February 16, 2023

Most would agree that wonderment is a state of mind which cannot be called up at will. But do certain conditions encourage or obstruct it? Guy Debord, the Dadaists, and others described the May 1968 student protests in Paris as a poetic revolution against the ubiquity

of the marketplace and its pressures, which made facets of consciousness such as wonderment, curiosity, reverie, and playfulness more difficult to experience.

Is wonderment indeed harder to come by in modernity, as we move away from traditions of magic and mystery such as myth, religion and monarchism? And does the efficiency underpinning a digital lifestyle invite or hinder the wide-eyed state we call wonder? Can a photograph of the northern lights trigger in us a true state of wonder, say, or does wonderment most often arise from multisensorial experience? Is wonderment an occasional influx of heightened feeling, or might it be indicative of a life well lived? Finally, what does wonderment, or the lack of it, teach us?

Readings:

Trebbe Johnson, “They Would Always Touch the Earth,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, pp. 3–5.

Richard Powers, “Places That Never End,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 82–87.

Nan Shepherd, “Being,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 179–180.

James Lasdun, “Glow,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 38.

John Landau, “Everyday Profundity,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 200–202.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Wunderkammer,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 83.

Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, pp. 136–137.

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Meeting Five

A Life of Reading and Writing

Thursday, March 23, 2023

Given the pressure of constant connectivity today, forging a life of reading and writing may feel like a solitary or revolutionary pursuit. But how might such a life benefit the individual and society at large? What exactly does a life of reading and writing demand of, and offer to, the individual? Do reading and writing complement or disrupt a digital lifestyle, and are words on the screen the same as words on the page? Like tasting wine or looking at a

painting, is there depth to reading and writing which we can only reach through honing our attention?

Readings:

Joshua Cohen, excerpted from *Attention: Dispatches from a Land of Distraction* (New York, Random House, 2018), pp. 3–8. (Printed handout and PDF attachment.)

Garett Hongo, “Written Against Power,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 11–12.

Gaston Bachelard, “Literature Contains All Art,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 5–6.

Virginia Woolf, “In the Presence of Reality,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 7.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “Must I Create?,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 20–22.

A Third Grader, “Poetry,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 146.

Jorge Luis Borges, “The Forging,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 23.

William Stafford, “You and Art,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 87.

Simon-Pierre Hamelin, “Tangier Syndrome,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 99–108.

David Abram, “Spinning Stories,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 199–200.

Ray Bradbury, “How to Keep and Feed a Muse,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 149–157.

Will Self, “The Printed Word in Peril,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 179–190.

Carl Sagan, “The Persistence of Memory,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 6.

Martha Graham, “There Is a Vitality,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 61.

Antonio Machado, “I Never Wanted Fame,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 135.

Martha Graham, “There Is a Vitality,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 61.

Meeting Six

Leisure

Thursday, April 20, 2023

The terms *free time* and *leisure* are often used interchangeably. But are they the same? For the Ancient Greeks, leisure was *scola* (the origin of our word for *school*), which meant, more than recreation or relaxation, the pursuit of knowledge.

For Marx, leisure stood in opposition to the industrial worker’s alienation from the value of their own labor and represented time spent away from addressing the *necessities* of life.

German philosopher Byung-Chul Han speaks of the *vita contemplativa* being privileged over the *vita activa* well into the Middle Ages and that the overemphasis today on constant activity is engendering a “new barbarism” (ASR 1, p. 83).

In this seminar, we will ask what defines leisure today: is it something greater than entertainment and relaxation? Do digital tools bring us more or less leisure? Do we feel as individuals that we have sufficient leisure in our lives? If not, what stands in the way, and what does the pursuit of true leisure teach us?

Readings:

Jonathan Simons, “Life Beyond the Machine: Leisure as Dissent.” (Printed handout)

Yuval Noah Harari, “Docile Cows,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 69.

Byung-Chul Han, “Vita Contemplativa,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 69–83.

Rebecca Solnit, “Wanderlust,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 163–169.

Carl Honoré, “In Praise of Slow,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 170–172.

Frédéric Gros, “Eternities,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 174–177.

Shunryū Suzuki, “Beginner’s Mind,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 178.

Libero Andreotti, “The Art of Drifting,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 101.

McKenzie Wark, “Spectacle of Disintegration,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp.102–103.

Guy Debord, “La Dérive,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 104–108.

Meeting Seven

Art in Dark Times

Thursday, May 11, 2013

In 1955, Theodor Adorno declared that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric.” He questioned the value of metaphor after a tragedy as unfathomable as the Holocaust. Past and present, some dismiss the arts as bourgeois pastimes, out of touch with the struggles of ordinary people. Given the climate emergency and our many other global problems, many today ask what value there is in pretty pictures and fictional stories.

In this seminar, we will discuss the purpose of art during dark times—ecological and political crises, war, genocide. Before the Romantic revolution, music and art helped to organize society and structure meaning. In contrast, is art today only about pleasure? Or might the arts and letters play an integral role in nourishing civil society and democracy? What is the role of the writer and artist under authoritarianism, under tyranny? Even if they eschew conventional activism, can artists nonetheless help maintain not only healthy minds but healthy societies too?

Readings:

Hannah Arendt, “Light in Dark Times,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 105.

Jonathan Simons, “Interview with Robert Zaretsky,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 106–121

Albert Camus, “The Detours of Art,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 122.

Robert Zaretsky, “Apprenticeship to Virtue,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 123–125.

Karen Olsson, “On Simone Weil,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 126.

Simone Weil, “Attention,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 127.

Eric Hobsbawm, “The Intellectual,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 128.

Robert Fulford, “The Literary Imagination in Our Time,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 129–133

James Farago, “Art in a Time of War,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 134–137.

Olga Tokarczuk, “The Tender Narrator,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 138–140.

Adrienne Rich, “Arts of the Possible,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 141–145.

Toni Morrison, “Peril,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 146–147.

Arthur Koestler, “The Screamers,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 148–154.

Abraham Lewin, “Literary Evening Speech,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 155–156.

Cornel West, “The Art of Living,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, p. 157.

Donna Tartt, “What Death Does Not Touch,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 158–159.

Leonard Cohen, “A Kite Is a Victim,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, pp. 160–161.

Meeting Eight

Solitude

Thursday, June 15, 2023

The past century has seen an explosion of single-person dwellings, rare in the previous millennia of human history. But given the ease and ubiquity of communication nowadays, our era may be one not of solitude but rather of solitude avoidance. Humans always had what we might refer to as the “contemplative gap”—accidental time when the *lack* of distraction, the *lack* of technology, brought us regularly, however reluctantly, in touch with our own inner thinking and feeling selves. Now, with constant connectivity, interpersonal connection, and global media only ever a click away, are we eradicating solitude and becoming an externalized species? Has solitude become an act of social dissent? What becomes of the human being when solitude—as opposed to aloneness—is entirely absent?

This month we consider different forms of solitude and ask ourselves how important they are. What might we be missing without them?

Readings:

Fenton Johnson, “Solitude and the Creative Life,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 129–139.

Sergio Benvenuto, “The Dream Bird,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 144–145.

Sherry Turkle, “Their Own Voices,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 82.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 21.

Leonard Cohen, “Loneliness and History,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, pp. 126–132.

Blaise Pascal, “Silence and Solitude,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 79.

C.G. Jung, “Toward Individuation,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 154–155.

May Sarton, “Journal of a Solitude,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 171–173.

Rainer Maria Rilke, “What Is Difficult,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, p. 174.

Patrick Curry, “A Room at the Back,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 175–179.

Kenneth Clark, “The Man in His Tower,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 180–182.

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Meeting Nine

Freedom and Civility

Thursday, July 6, 2023

From Nike’s 1988 “Just Do It” campaign to Ronald Regan’s notable speech on free-market capitalism at Moscow State University of the same year, the eighties saw American conceptions of freedom shift from age-old communal pursuits to individualist ideals. Late

capitalism is marked by its persistent promises of liberation through consumption, and the digital lifestyle is the *ne plus ultra* of commodified freedom.

In this, our last seminar, we will look at freedom through a number of philosophical lenses. As individuals, what makes us free? What does freedom mean for a society, and can freedom flourish in the digital age?

Readings:

Jonathan Simons, "Toward a New Renaissance," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 1–4.

Craig J. Peariso, "It's Not Easy Being Free," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 21–40.

Douglas Kellner, "Against the Decline of Individuality," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 46–48.

Peter Sloterdijk, "On Human Possibilities," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 52–54.

Stefan Zweig, "Remaining Oneself," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Three, pp. 183–187.

Lin Yutang, "On Dreams," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 5–9.

Douglas Kellner, "Against the Decline of Individuality," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 46–48.

Herbert Marcuse, "One-Dimensional Man," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 49–51.

Alasdair MacIntyre, "After Virtue," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Four, pp. 65–66.

James Baldwin, "The Creative Process," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, pp. 158–163.

Hermann Hesse, "Contemplate the Fire," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 203.

Thomas Merton, "Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander," in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number One, p. 22.

Nina Simone, “Where Did the Time Go?,” in *The Analog Sea Review*, Number Two, p. 208.

About **Jonathan Simons**

Jonathan Simons is the founding editor of offline publishing house Analog Sea and its literary journal, *The Analog Sea Review*. As a poet and essayist, he has written for publications including *The London Magazine*, *PN Review*, *El País*, *subTerrain Magazine*, and *The Analog Sea Review*. His work has been covered by, among others, the *Guardian*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Washington Post*, and *La Vanguardia*. He researched Buddhist poetics at Naropa University and McGill University and was formerly a visiting scholar at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Center for Humans and Machines, in Berlin.