

# **1977-2027: *The Public Burning* at 50**

**Fiction, History, Politics – Robert Coover’s Legacy**

**Keynote speakers: Mark Doten and Alexandra Kleeman**

**Campus Condorcet, Paris, June 10-11 2027**

Organized jointly by **TransCrit** (Université Paris 8-Vincennes-Saint-Denis), **SEARCH/USIAS** (Université de Strasbourg), **PRISMES** (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), **HÉRITAGES** (CY Cergy Paris Université), **HCTI** (Université Bretagne Sud), **LERMA** (Université Aix Marseille), **ACE** (Université Rennes 2), **IMAGER** (Université Paris-Est Créteil)

The year 2027 will mark the 50th anniversary of the controversial publication of Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*. Recounting the three days that led to the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953, Coover’s novel was initially subtitled a “historical romance” and has since often been seen as a classic example of what Linda Hutcheon termed “historiographic metafiction.” Not just content with investigating a dark and blind spot in recent American history, *The Public Burning* also showcased Coover’s political acumen, linking the nation’s recent past to its infamous present, as the novel was also intended by its author as a dubious gift to the Nixon administration—and to Nixon himself, had the then President of the USA not “outclowned” himself and been forced to resign in 1974 following the Watergate scandal. Coover’s choice to have all the protagonists in the Rosenberg case appear in the book under their own names famously led—as he himself recounted in “*The Public Burning* Log 1966-77”<sup>1</sup>—to editorial and legal complications that were to postpone the book’s publication, originally planned as a celebratory gift for the bicentennial of American Independence in 1976. At stake was of course the role Coover had Richard Nixon play in the novel; a lawyer by trade, Nixon was indeed Vice-President to Eisenhower at the time of the Rosenberg trial. By “electing” him narrator of one half of the narrative, Coover turned Nixon into a complex figure having to split his affection between Ethel Rosenberg and a cartoonish Uncle Sam, and in the process unwittingly undermining, through his

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the special issue of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (vol. 42, n° 1) that was published in 2000 in the wake of the novel’s 1998 reissue by Grove Press, after remaining out of print for more than a dozen years.

meaning-seeking rhetoric, the very grounds upon which the case against the Rosenbergs rested. If the novel thus owes much of its force to its satirical and farcical panache, this conference purports not just to celebrate a landmark of American postmodernism but to question its literary, aesthetic, and political legacy today. Can *The Public Burning* offer us some insight into the wherewithals of fictional literature in light of our contemporary Zeitgeist? Can it show us—critics, scholars, readers, and writers alike—ways of dealing, if not coming to terms, with an evermore nefarious political atmosphere? Can political fiction, *as such*—i.e., both as *fiction* and as a *political mode*<sup>2</sup>—still engage with a so-called real shaped by fake news, post-truths, and conspiracy theories? What becomes of satire in an environment in which the outrageously grotesque becomes the norm?

More than 25 years after a first critical assessment to be found in volume 42 of the review *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, this international conference invites potential contributors to re-read what is often seen as Robert Coover's *magnum opus*, in order to question the current political situation and imagine ways, old and new, of doing literature politically<sup>3</sup>.

Abstracts (300 to 350 words) together with a short biographical note should be sent by **October 1st 2026** to the following address: [publicburning50@sciencesconf.org](mailto:publicburning50@sciencesconf.org)

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<sup>2</sup> See how Coover, addressing Cervantes in Spanish, defines the role of the fiction writer in *Pricksongs & Descants* as a highly political one, consisting in the “exemplary” task of offering readers a public space for the exercise of their imagination: “your intention was ‘poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos, donde cada uno puedo llegar a entretenerse sin daño de barras, etc.’”

<sup>3</sup> Contributors could also broaden the perspective to include, along with *The Public Burning*, *A Political Fable* (a novella also known as *The Cat in the Hat for President*, which Coover tackled at the same time as he was writing *The Public Burning*) or *Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?* (a novel that gifts Richard Nixon with an alternate life story as a famous football player).