

## Cultural Memory Roundtable

3 June 2013 marked the first event of the [Society, Representation and Cultural Memory](#) research theme at Royal Holloway, University of London. Titled 'Roundtable on Cultural Memory', the event included staff and research student participants from a range of departments. PhD candidates offered poster presentations shown at lunch whilst staff gave 15-minute presentations throughout the day on a variety of subjects related to the theme. This report by Nikolas Wakefield offers a remembrance of the event, a form to recall what went on, to remember its various parts, and allow its contents to remain involved in the research culture of the university.

The day began with an introduction from current theme champion [Professor David Wiles](#) from the Department of Drama and Theatre Studies. He explained the rationale for the Society, Representation and Cultural Memory theme from a variety of perspectives. Wiles expressed a hope that the theme would go beyond offering an attractive marketing scheme, and would create possibilities for funded research projects that included members of diverse departments. Wiles concluded with a provocation to understand memory as an active process always intertwined with the forms of representation and the practices and knowledge of society.

The first panel of the day, 'Theoretical Perspectives', included presentations from members of departments of classics, history and geography. [Professor Richard Alston](#) explored issues of political power and cultural freedom through comparing urban landscapes of ancient Rome and the modern city. [Dr. Graham Smith](#) spoke of

the problems of oral history, noting the relevance of academic discourses around the composition and dis/composition of cultural memory through a case study of [Bella Keyzer](#), the female Welder of Dundee. Amy Cutler presented a wide range of materials, including film, photography and poetry on how forests remember war and act as living archives of the past. In the discussion that followed this panel a series of questions emerged through the links between papers, including the notions of forgetting and naming as inherent processes of cultural memory, and more broadly whether cultural memories are necessarily shared, or not.

Panel 2, 'Texts as Bearers of Memory', focused on two authors who represent different historical moments of British society and the relationship between trauma and cultural memory. [Dr. Christie Carson](#) delivered a paper on her involvement with the 2012 staging, in association with the British Cultural Olympiad, of all of Shakespeare's plays in different languages by theatre companies from around the world; this, she argued, had the surprising effect of diversifying the British brand of the playwright's work toward a celebration of non-Britishness. [Professor Juliet John](#) examined the 2012 bicentennial of Charles Dickens and the refiguring of Dickensian London and Victorian Britain into a more relevant past for contemporary society, through Dickens' modern conception of the audience as crowd rather than cultural elite. [Professor Colin Davis](#) related the temporalities of trauma in Freudian discourse to the work of Holocaust poet Charlotte Delbo, revealing the ongoing recollections as traumatic, rather than the experience itself. The discussion after Panel 2 centered around the idea of translating cultural memory, how this process always adds more to the memories over time, or the ability of events to change both the future and the past.

During lunch the participants of the roundtable viewed poster contributions by postgraduates, for which a £150 prize was offered for best work. [Eley Williams](#) displayed objects from her research into fiction and dictionaries, with a reference to the fake entries, such as 'mountweazel', authors insert in order to ensure their work is not copied by competing volumes. [Avril Tynan](#) illustrated the palimpsest-like nature of cultural memory through layered transparencies of texts over a map, drawing on Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage*. [Eve Smith](#) showed texts and images from recently acquired theatre archives and explored the transference from public life to private collection and back into the public domain. [Amy Cutler](#)'s display of war forests included wood samples, artist books and prints that further illustrated her topic of war forests. She was awarded the prize for best contribution, which demonstrated the quality and depth made possible through interdisciplinary research.

Panel 3, 'Artefacts as Bearers of Memory', included presentations from staff in music, drama and modern languages. [Dr. Giuliana Pieri](#) presented examples of Italian Fascist art that showed the importance of artistic images to politics, and the ability of these images to change meanings over time. [Professor Rachel Beckles Willson](#) demonstrated the middle-Eastern instrument, the Oud, and examined its ability to function as a cultural archive. [Profesor Gilli Bush-Bailey](#) expanded on Eve Smith's poster in the Roy Waters theatre archive at RHUL by exploring the notion of archival cultural capital that can be held, consumed, or freely accessed. [Professor Michael Spagat](#) introduced the 'Every Casualty' campaign on which he has worked

for several years, which seeks to distribute lists of names of individuals harmed by war. The discussion following these presentations linked performance and performativity to cultural memory, examining issues of embodiment and circulation.

To conclude the day a roundtable discussion including all participants identified continuities between topics and developed future directions of the group. Several mentioned the importance of forgetting in the ongoing cultural practices surrounding the past, as the necessity of not remembering in order to live in the present. Some spoke of the continual exchange between the present and the past, in which both offer reappraisals of the other. Looking forward, participants were interested in holding more roundtable events which might focus on the other theme title words, society and representation. New keywords emerged from the day that may lead to future events, including ethics, space, being, performance and death. The role of technology was noted as a topic which will prove relevant in future work, both as how to circulate the theme's progress through the internet and investigations into the role of technology both personal and public in society. As the day drew to a close and participants prepared to depart, there was an air of excitement from the commonalities that emerged between such seemingly disparate disciplines. Watch this space for more information on future activities.