

CENTRE FOR CRITICAL CULTURAL RESEARCH  
FACULTY OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

CULTURAL MEMORY SYMPOSIUM

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ABSTRACTS

[in alphabetical order – a programme will follow in due course]

[programme and rail connection information will be sent at a later date]

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**Magic Realism and Heritage Culture: Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated***

*Everything Is Illuminated* is centred on two characters heavily implicated in heritage culture and consumption. Jonathan, a third generation American Jew from a family of Holocaust survivors, has travelled to Ukraine in order to research – or, in a less charitable reading, to consume – his family's European past. Alex, his Ukrainian tour guide, works for the family company 'Heritage Tourism', a memory enterprise that is paradoxically grounded in an act of forgetting. Alex's grandfather has for forty years repressed his own implication in the events of the Holocaust: his complicity in the murder of his Jewish friend. His subsequent involvement in the heritage industry suggests the role of heritage culture and the discourse of commemoration in displacing the operation of memory, replacing it with an economically and nationally interested orientation towards a collective past. Within the novel's exploration of heritage culture, Jonathan's magic realist narratives of the destroyed shtetl Trachimbrod play an ambivalent role. These narratives, I will suggest, both satirize the exoticization of shtetl existence by the Jewish American Holocaust industry, and problematize the possibility of gaining knowledge about the past, raising wider questions about the role of cultural memory beyond its attempts to accurately encode collective history. In particular, I will argue, the

use of magic realism in a third-generation Holocaust text interrogates both the epistemological status and the pragmatic function of cultural memory itself, exploring the tension between history and myth both in heritage culture and, arguably, in contemporary culture as a whole. This paper will explore these issues through a careful analysis of *Everything Is Illuminated*, informed by the work of such theorists as Maurice Halbwachs, Robert Eaglestone and Paul Ricoeur, in order to examine the role of the novel's magic realist elements in interrogating the fine line between the reconstruction and consumption of collective history.

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### **The Culture of Memorialisation and Remembrance at Auschwitz-Birkenau.**

This paper will consider the different forms of memorial design that have either been realised or suggested at the site of the former Death Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. It will ask: what form did these memorials take and whom were they memorialising? Ideas for a memorial at the site began while the camp was fully operational; inmates recognized their responsibility to commemorate the victims of suffering and their memory was to be enshrined in this site. The first acknowledged design was undertaken by the inmate artist Jerzy Brandhuber, in 1944. His highly narrativising memorial used stones, rocks and boulders to represent lost communities and individuals, and called for the site to be levelled, which suggests that the cultural memory of the horror experienced at this location was so strong that it did not require the physical camp or artefacts to support it. His design was never realised and for the next twenty-two years no permanent marker attested to what had taken place at the site. Pilgrims undertook individual acts of remembrance at Auschwitz-Birkenau, indicative of recalling the memory of victims and place, whilst the state enacted civic rituals that were used as staging for politically inspired demonstrations aimed at reinforcing the notion of Poland's

martyrology during the Second World War. Of especial interest will be the lack of accommodation for the remembrance of individual's in favour of a collective memory. Through a detailed survey of the culture of memorialisation at the site we will see that memories of place and experience were usurped by political agendas and questions raised through the aesthetic responses of the survivors to the many different memorial designs impeded

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**The Sowdun project - testimonial imagination, Border ballads, and the politics of (dis-)enchantment.**

In the late 1990s I began what became my *Sowdun project* and, since that time, I have been using various Border ballads as a starting-point for weaving together visual images, commissioned music and different modalities of text as a means to explore quasi-pagan musical and historical material from the English/Scottish Borders region. I have increasingly treated this material as a resource for positing alternative understandings of contemporary cultural phenomena, a strategy I understand in terms of Richard Kearney's exposition of 'testimonial imagination'. To date this ongoing project has led to, or else directly influenced, a number of academic papers and book chapters and four creative publications: *Debatable Lands Vol 1* (with Samira Abbassy, Jane Millar & Gary Peters) 2007; *chimaerae verae* (with Ruth Jones) 2007; *Eight Lost Songs* (with Gary Peters) 2004; and *Between Carterhaugh and Tamshiel Rig: a borderline episode* (2004) (See <http://www.wildconversations.isophia.co.uk/> for details). Over the course of this work, which with the first volume of the ongoing *Debatable Lands* project has taken a more explicitly political turn, a number of parallels between my own concerns and those of Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*, and arguments within Rebecca Solnit's writing – particularly her *As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender and Art* ((2001) – have begun to emerge. This has drawn me

into a parallel examination of developments in cultural and social geography (Massey, Ingold) and the politics of the art practice-led research within the wider framework of the university. The consists of a 'report on work in progress' with regard to the above by offering a reflexive account of this work and its various theoretical links and practical ramifications.

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**"I knew the story by now; now I wanted a place": Questing for the Past in Daniel Mendelsohn's The Lost: In Search for Six of Six Million**

In The Lost: In Search for Six of Six Million, Daniel Mendelsohn chronicles his systematic and extensive search for the unknown truth about the fate of his maternal great-uncle Schmiel's family who perished in the Holocaust.

Mendelsohn's determined pursuit of his family's history takes him all the way to Bolechow, Ukraine, the lost hometown at the center of the Yaeger family's stories and memories. Wryly observing that "the return to the ancestral shtetl was by now...cliché" (109), he self-consciously positions his project within the growing body of works—novels, memoirs, art installations, and films—whose authors, descendants of Holocaust survivors, set out to uncover their family's past by going back to Eastern Europe, where their ancestors used to live before WWII. Inevitably, on these roots trips, as the ambivalent "returns" are often called, the travelers encounter the double distance of time and space.

Like other questing memory tourists, Mendelsohn meditates on how much of the past has been irretrievably lost and will remain unknowable. Yet, demanding that he take full measure of that loss, his journey to Bolechow makes his family's past more tangible and relevant to his own life in New York. After he experiences the suffocating darkness of the small dark cellar where Schmiel Yaeger spent the last days of his life and gets to walk up to the tree in front of which his great-uncle was shot almost sixty years ago, Mendelsohn remarks, "I confronted the place itself, the thing and not the idea of it" (501). Even though, as he realizes, his narrative reconstruction of

Schmiel's tragic fate will always remain incomplete, his visit to the site of family memory has lent the past renewed urgency. Drawing from and building on such critical concepts as "placeless melancholia" (Eva Hoffman), "rootless nostalgia" and "negative memory" (Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer), my analysis of The Lost will explore the relationship between intergenerational memory and place. Why and how does "the return to the ancestral shtetl" matter for the descendants of Holocaust survivors? How does the past get lost in or transmitted through place memories and the places themselves? How does the quest journey align with the family's memory narratives and how does it transform them?

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**(de)ambulantis: Cities in nomadic bodies**

Strolling through cultural and sensorial relations between bodies and cities, I will argue that urbanism can be done in an everyday basis, through interfering in systems of perceptions and affections that citizens have towards the places they are in. Relying on the fact that cities are both material and immaterial, to improve the quality of urban life is absolutely necessary to put conformities at stake. Creating situations where one can sense and enact lived spaces are far more effective than designing and re-designing physical spaces. Questioning the excessively material approaches that architects and urbanists tend to work with, this paper exalts the spaces of experience, exchange and debate. Rather than symbolic legacy that tries to embody the past within crystallized forms, simple urban actions are analysed as potential sources of transforming memory into an active subject of everyday life. In this sense, the idea of "Milieu de mémoire" in opposition to "Lieu de mémoire" - as posed by Pierre Nora - are investigated. I will be arguing that memory is embodied within us and that the body carries the memories of its places and cultures. Therefore the insertion of art and creativity in the everyday life through displacements and nomadisms are powerful "strategies of contaminations"

between people, ideas and behaviours. It is exactly in this interplay of changeable frontiers that new attitudes towards radical change and resistance to the spectacularization, banalization and suppression of pleasure in urban experience can emerge. Finally, if cities are moveable bodies, embedded in the daily, lived, ordinary body, as much as the bodies are travelling cities, this research fosters micro-politics that urbanize the body and small gestures that embody cities.

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### **Images of Suffering, Memory and Collective Stipulation**

This paper will explore various modes of operation of the concepts of individual and collective memory in the context of still photographs of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the subsequent refugee crises in Zaire, Tanzania and Burundi. The focus will be placed upon the relationship between the discourse conceptualising the faculty of personal and societal memory and the rhetoric of the photographic image with inclusion of the discussion of the photographs' mode of production, circulation and reception. Images of genocidal violence, traumatic experiences and bodily mutilation form an increasingly formalised and accessible entity of reference. This paper proposes to determine and explore the interaction between those images and memory. This determination will be conducted through a detailed discussion of the ontological issues about the very nature of the still image derived largely from the writings of Roland Barthes. Subsequently, the observations concerning the photographic image will be contextualised by an exploration of Henri Bergson's theories of pure memory and perception as well as Susan Sontag's proposition of replacing the notion of collective memory with that of collective stipulation. Bergson's assertions about memory are not straightforwardly translatable onto considerations of the photographic image. However, this paper proposes that it is possible to highlight discursive parallels between the modes of operation of the still image and memory

through the exploration of concepts of time and duration. This argument will largely rely on the examination of Roland Barthes's definition of photography's noeme as: "that-has-been". Barthes's theory will also be used to contemplate photography's relationship with the concept of collective memory/stipulation. This paper will argue that Susan Sontag's proposition combined with Roland Barthes's assertion about the subordinate role of the spectator during an encounter with the photographic image is especially relevant if the creation of collective memory/stipulation is concerned with traumatic experience of cultural, geographical and ethnic "others". This will lead to a discussion of photographic image replacing individual memories in the creation of common societal consciousness, or societal memory of trauma induced by genocide and post-genocidal humanitarian crises in locales exotic to the image/memory receiving body (individual and collective).

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### **Pervasive Memory**

The idea of *pervasive memory* arose thinking of this symposium. The two terms belong etymologically and in the practice to two different fields. The first one means - according to the dictionary - *to spread in the space in a immaterial way*, it's a spatial quality and recently it has been introduced in computing studies. The second one refers to the time dimension and in the social studies field it is usually used in conjunction with adjectives like individual, collective, social and cultural. Pervasive - in the digital domain - is synonymous of ubiquitous computing, a phenomenological approach to computer and computation where this power distribute in the environment around us, in space, objects and body, in order to re-establish a more natural interaction between the real and virtual world. In this paper the focus is on memory as a *value* attached to objects and places, a *value* that transforms the natural functions and physical nature of both. In the pervasive approach to computing, objects and places

embed both the computational and informational power: the power to compute information and the power to transmit and receive it through the Network. The *dataspace* is the new fabric of the object and of the place. Memory in that becomes embedded in the context (object or place) from where it is originated, both in individual and social terms. Sterling defines this new dimension with a neologism *spime*:

*a "spime" is something that, through pervasive RFID and GPS tracking, can track its history of use and interact with the world.*

Affective, social, historic, cultural values become an integral part of a new physicality of the world. The paper proposed for the symposium attempts to discuss the social and cultural as long as the possible interactive design implications of this novel human and social condition.

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### **The Tectonics of Remembering - The Textual and the Architectural in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz***

Memorial and architectural construction are often intricately interconnected and even mutually constitutive in W.G. Sebald's work: architectural space may serve as a site for personal memory recall as well as for the formation of cultural memory, while a certain construction of cultural memory may underlie particular building practices of the past. In *Austerlitz*, Sebald evokes architectural space, of course, as it is inserted into and mediated in textuality, through the narrator's persona, visual intertexts or overt textual description. Such an intertext is Austerlitz's distinction between monumental, public spaces meant for remembrance and small domestic spaces, unlikely to be recalled beyond personal memory, which strongly echoes Walter Benjamin's thinking about turn of the century urban space - and will also inform the methodological aspect of this study. My paper explores the correspondence between the specific materiality of architectural spaces in *Austerlitz*, on the

one hand, and the narrative strategies of remembrance as they are framed by the textual integration of architectural material, on the other hand. This will help to reflect on what both Sebald and Benjamin allude to: the potential of a personal architectural history, in search of a 'family likeness' [*Familienähnlichkeiten*] in the constantly changing public and personal built environment. The critical reception of the photographic medium in Sebald's texts is already abundant (e.g. in the works of Eric Downing, Andreas Huyssen and James Long). Considering the integration of architectural material in *Austerlitz* may, however, shed light on the specific intermedial mechanisms, which perform exchanges between private and public remembrance in his textuality. This could help to address the ways in which what one may call 'architectural memory' has more to offer from within the text, than the textual and photographic media alone - an important concern in current discussions on the intermedial aspects of cultural memory.

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### **Echoes of an Intangible Past: Exile, Memory and Identity in the Works of Second Generation Spanish Civil War Exiles**

It is perhaps the words of writer Nuria Parés (1925-) that best describe the difficulties faced by second generation exiles in Mexico in their search for identity: "ellos fueron la voz y nosotros el eco". Her words, "they [first generation exiles] were the voice, and we [second generation exiles] are the echo" poignantly highlight the problematic of a lost homeland, and the overshadowing and loss of the self through the exilic experience. It has long been argued that memory is indispensable in the process of identity formation. We *are* because we remember who *we have been*. Yet, what happens when we have *no* memory of who we have been? What if, for example, that particular trajectory was prematurely truncated by exile? The question remains: who are we if who we could have been has been forgotten, or rather

was never allowed to be? In this paper I explore the notion of memory and exile in the literature of second generation exiles in Mexico. In particular I focus on the works of Angelina Muñiz-Huberman (1936-) and Federico Patán (1937-). Firstly, I analyse the concept of memory through Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory. Having no direct memories of the Spanish Civil War has left second generation exiles heirs of the memories of their parents. I argue that this process has direct ramifications for their literary production. Perhaps, the greatest impact has been on characterisation and the presence of fragmented identities. In the second part of the paper, I suggest that this choice of characterisation echoes the fracture and decomposition in memory that is the result of exile. The Halbwachsian model of collective memory is useful here: as Richard Sennett argues, Halbwachs is urging individuals to move towards a "de-centred subject". I examine whether the works of second generation exiles adequately answer Halbwachs' challenge of a plurality of representation in the face of a common and shared experience.

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### **Seeking Someone Else's History: Gardzienice's Postmodern Mythology**

This paper seeks first to identify the tendency in Polish Romanticism to locate the Kantian 'Thing' in the sublime body of the Romantic hero, giving particular attention to Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady*. Having illustrated the mode in which the Romantic hero acted as both the embodiment of historical will as well a 'deputy' to the future (i.e. the medium through whom the People will give birth to itself), I will locate Polish Romantic nostalgia for an autonomous origin as a longing rooted in ideological fantasy. I will then turn to Gardzienice's current preoccupation with Greek mythology. Identifying □i□ek's notion that the sublime body of the political master-signifier is erased in democracy, wherein the locus of power is inherently a void and any leader functions as a usurper, I will look at this theatre company's exploitation of

mythology as a means of relocating the displaced 'Thing'. Here I point out Staniewski's use of Jung's supposition that mythology sheds light on the meaning of one's own epoch in the greater process of the historical enlargement of human consciousness. Finally, I plan to situate Staniewski's belief in the possibility of 'collective transcendence' through a theatrical use of mythology as a substitute for a history that, given Poland's present autonomy, can no longer be viewed nostalgically.

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### **Remembering 68: politics and nostalgia**

40 years after the insurrection in Paris in May 1968, and 41 after the Summer of Love in San Francisco, the late '60s are the subject-matter of recollection in academic symposia and popular broadcasting. In the latter, popular music tends to fuse with wider cultural but not political scenarios, and student protest (as against the US occupation of South Vietnam) tends to be seen as a cultural phenomenon, so that the 60s are represented as a permissive era but less one of revolution. Within academic texts reconsidering May '68 in the 1990s, too, differences emerge as to what were the key theoretical frameworks, and moments of change, and as to what is the legacy of 1968. Memories in turn shape attitudes to revolt. What, then, might we remember?

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### **Mapping Rachel Rosenthal's Jewishness: Autotopographical Performance as Cultural Memory**

Rachel Rosenthal's body and its performance work have been strongly identified with the earth itself – and, not occasionally, with the processes of its creation. In Una Chaudhuri's introduction to *Rachel's Brain and Other Storms*

(2001), she writes that Rosenthal 'began making performances two hundred million years ago, when the break-up of her body formed the continents, the oceans, the earth as we know it'. Bonnie Marranca has referred to Rosenthal's performance art as 'autobiology', stating that as Rosenthal moves beyond the personal, 'the face of the earth has become a metaphor for her own physiognomy'. I wish to propose a related model for analysing Rosenthal's work, using the concept of 'autotopography'. This is based on, but not identical to, Dee Heddon's usage of the term which is meant to signal the performative location of a particular individual in actual space, a locatedness that has implications for both subject and place. My application of the term 'autotopographical' in relation to Rosenthal's work focuses on the mutual constructions of interior and exterior spaces to create meaning for audiences through geographic tropes. Furthermore, through an autotopographical embodiment of both 'home' and 'exile', Rosenthal performs the cultural memory of diasporic subject. Marranca's formation implies that lying just beneath and informing both symbolism and performance strategy are the sedimented layers of Rosenthal's performances of self and the gestural scars these have left over an extended period of time. Rosenthal the shamanic crone could only manifest herself in the mid-1980s as a result of a series of earlier autobiographical performances. These performances - such as, *Charm* (1977), *The Death Show* (1978) and *Soldier of Fortune* (1981) - are both haunted and driven by a Jewishness which is rarely named explicitly. When positioned within Rosenthal's career trajectory, they also problematize notions of cultural memory in that Rosenthal's autobiographical performances of a very specific assimilated Jewishness eventually result in the apparent disappearance of Jewishness altogether in what may be considered spectacles of autotopographical essentialism. In this paper, I am particularly interested in how cultural memory can be expressed through moments of becoming that slip around the tensions between formlessness and materiality.