



A message from the Director



**In the course
of the last year
BIRTHA has
been involved
in an**

exceptionally wide range of activities, making a decisive overall contribution to collaborative research across the Faculty. On the funding side, significant support has been offered to the five Faculty themes; we have underwritten several major international conferences; and we have covered the costs for visiting speakers, symposia and other events. We have also been able to offer small amounts of money to postgraduate students, and we have more recently set up the BIRTHA research programmes scheme. The aim of this scheme is to encourage collective research projects on a pre-determined theme, and a sum of up to £5000 is offered on a competitive basis to the winning proposal. Congratulations to Ika Willis, winner of the inaugural competition, who describes her project ("Word Unbecoming Flesh") in this newsletter. This year

funds will be somewhat tighter, but there is still enough to make a real difference. Full details of all schemes are given on the BIRTHA website, which also lists our many other activities. In addition to the funding it offers to colleagues, BIRTHA also organises a number of specific events in the course of the academic session. The flagship occasion is the annual lecture, and we are expecting a visit from the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa for next year's event. However, there are several other important fixtures in the calendar, notably the annual debate and the regular coffee mornings in collaboration with RED. I strongly encourage colleagues to participate in these events, which are ultimately about encouraging dialogue and promoting collaborative initiatives among academics who may be from quite different areas of the Faculty. BIRTHA's mission is to foster the intellectual vitality of the Faculty in whatever ways it can, and ideas about how this might be achieved are always welcome. BIRTHA's research workshop sessions take

place weekly on Thursday afternoons when members of the Research & Enterprise Development (RED) team are on hand to discuss research funding issues with colleagues. In terms of national collaborative activities, we are now actively involved in the setting up of a consortium of Humanities Institutes across the UK. This will undoubtedly enhance our profile externally and bring major benefits in terms of cost-sharing for visiting speakers and other shared events. At local level, there is an exciting programme for the coming year. The website, which is an essential bookmark for everyone, gives details on a weekly basis of all events around the Faculty. Finally, and as ever, I am immensely indebted to Sam Barlow for all her hard work in the BIRTHA office, without which the whole operation would be much more difficult.

Director:
Professor Tim Unwin,
Department of French
(T.A.Unwin@bristol.ac.uk)



Word Unbecoming Flesh – Beyond Text, Across Media

Dr Ika Willis, is the winner of the inaugural BIRTHA Research Programmes Scheme award on "The Future of the Book"

The idea that we 'read' not just books, but images, sounds, and films – even people and situations – is a familiar one. But is *reading* – text – really the best metaphor for the way we interpret the world today, in an age where sounds and images are circulating faster and more widely than ever before? When I can take a photo on my mobile phone and email it to my mum; shoot video footage and upload it to YouTube; broadcast a recording of my voice on my blog; or download that song that's stuck in my brain wirelessly direct to my iPod?

In response to just this kind of question, and in order to explore the practices of knowledge production, circulation, and interpretation which lie 'beyond text', the AHRC has announced a new strategic funding initiative – 'Beyond Text: Sounds, Voices, Images, and Objects' – with a budget of £5.5 million over the next five years. In preparation for a major grant application to this initiative, a small group of us here in the Faculty of Arts have put together a research programme entitled 'Word Unbecoming Flesh: Beyond Text, Across Media', which is being funded by a £5,000 grant from BIRTHA. The group is led by myself (Departments of English and Classics & Ancient History) and Dr Simon Jones (Department of Drama), together with colleagues from the Departments of French, Theology, and Music; we are also collaborating with the Centre for the Study of Visual and Literary Cultures in France and the Screen Research @ Bristol Group.

We are interested in the transformations which occur beyond text and across media: how does film

visualize sound? Does 'word become flesh' in live performance? How does poetry, prose, or music engage our imaginations visually? We are interested, too, in the ways in which new media transform the possibilities for thinking about transmission, memory, and interpretation. And despite the references to YouTube and iPods above, these questions are not new: as Friedrich Kittler has documented in his book *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, the invention of film, photography, and phonography already, over a century ago, transformed the place of writing both as art and as metaphor for memory, coding, and transmission, in ways which all of us are still coming to terms with.

Our research programme accordingly explores topics such as: the transformation of 'liveness' by technologies of recording and mediation; the impact of amplified sound on our experience of urban space, and its visualization on film; the way in which literary writing engages the visual; and the transformation of listening and of music theory by sound recording. The programme will involve a range of events with invited speakers from the UK and overseas, from public lectures and screenings to round-tables, structured dialogues, and symposia, over eighteen months from January 2008 to June 2009.

If you are interested in attending the workshops, with a view to getting involved in the application to the AHRC which we will be making in the next few months, we would be delighted to hear from you: please contact Dr Ika Willis or Dr Simon Jones.

BIRTHA CONFERENCE

Concepts of Infection

29-31 March, 2007



Concepts of infection pervade and shape contemporary discourse, politics, and everyday life. Recent concerns with HIV/AIDS, avian flu, STDs, and emerging viruses remind us of the medical and cultural importance of infection. They also present an opportunity to critically reflect on the history, meanings, and uses of this enduring concept. To this end, a group of scholars from the departments of English (Lesel Dawson), German (Alexander Kosenina) and Philosophy (Alexander Bird and Michael Bresalier) organized an interdisciplinary conference to explore the historical, social, cultural and intellectual dimensions of infection.

The conference formally inaugurated Bristol's new Medical Humanities programme. In keeping with the interdisciplinary focus of the programme, the conference brought together an impressive range of scholars from medicine, history, philosophy, social and cultural theory, and literary studies. Invited speakers included Sander Gilman (Emory University), Helen King



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(Reading), Stuart Siddell (Bristol), Johannes Türk (Indiana, Bloomington), Michael Worboys (Manchester), Thomas Ruetten (Newcastle), Clark Lawlor (Northumbria), Roger Cooter (UCL), Claudia Stein (Warwick), Sean de Koekkoek (Leiden) and Yvonne Wübben (Berlin). A call for papers attracted a large number of submissions from across the world, of which we accepted 26. With nearly 50 registered participants, in addition to several students from our new intercalated BA in Medical Humanities (who also assisted with organization and refreshments), this was a truly international event.

Participants engaged a broad mix of perspectives that aimed to unpack the definition of infection and to

trace ways in which it is imagined, represented and theorized across disciplines, cultures, periods and places. The intellectual content of the conference far exceeded our expectations. We were particularly struck by the readiness of participants to work across disciplinary boundaries. We carefully grouped talks into themes to facilitate exchange and continuity within and between sessions. As it turned out speakers were able to make many more connections than we had anticipated. Keynote addresses from Gilman and King respectively highlighted the contemporary and historical importance of infection concepts, and especially their elusive, polysemic and ideologically

freighted qualities. A key set of ideas that linked many papers concerned how literary and political metaphors of infection both shape and are shaped by medical knowledge and practices. A key lesson of this conference, then, is that concepts of infection can be effectively used to explore the important relationship between medicine, culture and society.

The organisers are most grateful to the Wellcome Trust, BIRTHA and the Faculty of Arts for sponsoring this event. Their support helped make this conference a success and has encouraged us to broaden the range of activities in the Medical Humanities programme in Bristol.

Michael Bresalier
Department of Philosophy

Birtha Conference & the 5th Marks Conference: **Ruins & Reconstructions: Pompeii in the Popular Imagination**

17-19 July, 2007

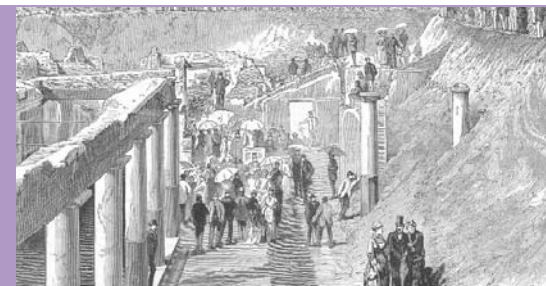
Organisers: Dr Shelley Hales and Dr Joanna Paul (Liverpool)

The aim of this event was to provide a stimulating environment in which academics studying Pompeii and its reception could be brought together with practitioners who have tried to bring Pompeii to life in media such as novels, photography, documentary and journalism.

Almost 70 delegates attended from all over the world, including the USA, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Topics included literary recollections of Pompeii (by travellers such as Goethe and Shelley, and novelists from Mme de Staël, Gautier and Bulwer Lytton to Proust) and artistic reactions (from Kauffman to Rothko), Pompeii's influence on interior design, architecture and costume, looking at material as geographically far spread as stadia in Mexico and cinemas in Stockholm. The final session considered the role

of Pompeii in providing a metaphor for modern disasters. Susann Lusnia from Tulane University, New Orleans, spoke about her experiences of teaching Pompeii to students who themselves had been recent victims of natural disaster.

The conference also included contributions from Ray Laurence of Birmingham University who talked about the process of working with journalist Alex Butterworth to create a popular book on Pompeii, the novelist Lindsey Davis who talked on the role Pompeii played in her Roman crime novels, the artist and writer Victor Burgin who introduced his recent video installation at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and a postgraduate dance student, He Jin Jang, from the University of Michigan who showcased her Pompeii-inspired choreography.



The conference also featured a display of the winning entries of the Cast Project, a school outreach initiative sponsored by the University of Bristol Alumni Foundation. The project took the form of a national competition in which students were asked to use images of the body casts from Pompeii to inspire their own personal response to Pompeii and its destruction. Of the almost 200 entries, 24 were on display including stories, poems, collages, models, music, and even a short film. The organisers are very grateful to the supporters of the event, which included the British Academy, BIRTHA, Lady Marks, the Nearchos Foundation and the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology at the University of Liverpool.

BIRTHA CONFERENCE

Emancipation, Liberation, Freedom

26-29 July, 2007



My last duty as Director of the Centre for Romantic Studies earlier this year was to preside over 'Emancipation, Liberation, Freedom', the 2007 BARS / NASSR conference. This was a joint conference held in Bristol by the two leading scholarly societies for the Romantic period: BARS, the British Association for Romantic Studies, and NASSR, the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism.

It was held to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Bristol was of course central to the slave trade and so provided a fitting venue for such a momentous event. The conference was held in the Wills Memorial Building, which provided a spectacular and prestigious venue, and receptions were held at the City Museum and Art Gallery, and at the Empire and Commonwealth Museum.

Speakers were also invited to consider the themes of 'Emancipation,

Liberation, Freedom' in relation to the slave trade and its abolition, and to other anniversaries such as the birth of William Blake in 1757. Keynote speakers were drawn from Britain, America, and Australia, and over 300 delegates attended, most of whom gave papers. 'Emancipation, Liberation, Freedom' was the largest conference of its kind in the world and a truly international event.

In addition to the very high quality of research presented (over 150 proposals were actually rejected), many delegates took advantage of the opportunity to visit the ruins of Tintern Abbey, mindful of William Wordsworth's poem and the strong associations of Bristol and the surrounding area with the literature of the Romantic period. This delightful trip was succeeded by the conference banquet held in the Victoria Rooms, after which Prof. Tim Webb delivered a memorable special lecture.

An event of this size and complexity required the skills of many people and organizations – too many to acknowledge here – but I would particularly like to thank John Halliwell, Research Assistant to the Centre for Romantic Studies, for his tremendous application and enthusiasm throughout the three years it took to plan and organize 'Emancipation, Liberation, Freedom'. And special mention should be made of BIRTHA. Simply put, the conference could not have gone ahead without the enduring support of BIRTHA and the tireless attention of Sam Barlow and her team. I hope that BIRTHA will be able to build on the many friends and contacts that were made during the four days, and I wish the Institute well.

Professor Nick Groom
University of Exeter
(Cornwall Campus)

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

The following is a list of forthcoming events supported by BIRTHA

Wednesday 24th October 2007

The Conflict and Culture Study Group

The launch event for the conflict and culture research seminar series, which will include workshops, plenary lectures and symposium running from November 2007 – September 2008. Organised by Martin Hurcombe (French) http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/birtha/centres/conflict_culture.html

Saturday 19th January 2008

**Religious Identity in the Ancient world:
Assessing Recent Approaches**

Organised by Bella Sandwell
(Classics & Ancient History)

22-23 February 2008

JISLAC Regional Seminar in the West

Organised by Matthew Brown (Hispanic Studies)

Scheduled for 30th April 2008

Third BIRTHA Debate

Time and title tbc

Monday 12th May 2008

BIRTHA Event

David Dabydeen will present readings from his work

Time and venue tbc

20-23 June 2008

BIRTHA Conference

The Schools and Institutes Abroad

Organised by David Shankland (Anthropology)

19-21 September 2008

**An enigma explored: medieval art
and architecture at Bristol cathedral**

Organised by Jon Cannon, Pam King and Beth Williamson (Departments of History of Art and English)

For more details of these events and for a comprehensive listing of all faculty, school and departmental events please check the BIRTHA events page:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/birtha/events/>

THE BRISTOL INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES AND ARTS



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