



WestminsterResearch

<http://www.wmin.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

"War! What is it good for?" The work of the Group for War and Culture Studies.

Debra Kelly

School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages

This is an electronic, author-formatted version of an article published in the Journal of War and Culture Studies, 1 (1). pp. 3-7, August 2007. The definitive version is available online at:

<http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Article.id=7777/>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners. Users are permitted to download and/or print one copy for non-commercial private study or research. Further distribution and any use of material from within this archive for profit-making enterprises or for commercial gain is strictly forbidden.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of the University of Westminster Eprints (<http://www.wmin.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail wattsn@wmin.ac.uk.

Editorial

War! What is it good for? The Work of the Group for War and Culture Studies

Debra Kelly *University of Westminster*

[War and torture] are, in the most literal and concrete way possible, an appropriation, aping, and reversing of the action of creation itself.

(Scarry 1985: 21).

Culture has espoused war as a major topic. And significant canons of aesthetic interpretation in literature, film and the visual arts have emerged throughout the twentieth century.

(Williams 1994: 17)

This founding issue of the *Journal of War and Culture Studies* is another milestone in the development in the work of the Group for War and Culture Studies (GWACS) established at the University of Westminster, London in 1995.¹ The original aim of the Group was broadly to undertake and promote research into the relationships between war and culture, and its focus was France and Francophone countries in the twentieth century, as the idea for the research group took form in a French department in a School of Languages. France provides a particularly complex and fascinating case-study for an investigation into the impact of war on cultural production and cultural history, having been at war for almost fifty years of the twentieth century, with radically different experiences and memories of the two world wars, and still living with the legacies of brutal colonial wars. An understanding of the impact that the experience of these different types of war has made on French cultural, social and political identity is essential if we are to analyze the developments in that country throughout the twentieth century, and indeed its role in European and world affairs. The approaches developed by the Group and its participating scholars in its research seminars, conferences and publications focusing on France formed the working methods for the future as its focus expanded in later years.

The Group's place of origin in an academic environment of literary, linguistic and cultural studies, rather than in a department of history, is essential to the approaches and methodologies of the Group in its analysis of the impact that war has had on various forms of cultural production. The initial announcement of the Group's establishment, and a call for interested researchers to contact us, was overwhelming with some 200 scholars from fourteen countries around the world indicating their interest in those early days. Frequent requests to participate in our activities came from those working in what has come to be called the field of war and culture studies, but whose expertise and interest was in geographical and cultural areas other than France. It soon became clear that it was both illogical and intellectually narrow to focus solely on France, and that although the experiences of France and Francophone countries constituted a valuable case-study, the analysis of war cannot be confined to one cultural area, for obvious reasons, and was indeed undesirable from a scholarly point of view. In 2000 at its annual conference, which that year took as its theme

¹ The founding members of the GWACS were academic staff of the School of Languages: Ethel Tolansky (whose idea it was to focus on the relationship between war and culture and to establish the research group), Hilary Footitt, Marie-Monique Huss, Riccardo Steiner, Alan Morrison, Valerie Holman (First GWACS Research Fellow), and Debra Kelly (who has been the Group's Director since 2000).

'Legacies of War: Mourning and Beyond', the GWACS further developed the interdisciplinary approach that had guided its work on France, continuing to foster interdisciplinary work by specialists in cultural history, literary studies and all forms of visual studies, and extended its geographical coverage to include France's main allies and adversaries throughout the twentieth century, while retaining its distinct emphasis on cultural history and cultural production as significant forces that have shaped the experience, representation and memory of war. A comparative approach, which at this conference covered France, Spain, Britain, Germany, quickly showed itself to be the most productive, insightful and stimulating. The core of the Group's work, seminars, and annual conferences, and the preparation of resulting publications, was originally based in London, with participants coming from around the UK and other countries to participate there (its activity is extensive and can be consulted in full at <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/sshl/page-1322>).

In 2000, the GWACS established a second research site at the University of Bristol with an inaugural lecture by Dr Valerie Holman, First GWACS Research Fellow, on aerial propaganda and print culture in France in the Second World War. This was followed by the organization of a series of one-day symposia, the first of which considered 'The Figure of the Soldier' across the Russian, French and Francophone, Spanish, and German (East and West) cultural areas, again in the spirit of extending the geographical scope of the Group's work. Key aspects of the Group's work continue to be the relationship between war and culture during conflict and its aftermath, the forms and practices of cultural transmission in time of war, and the analysis of the impact of war on cultural production, cultural identity and international cultural relations. This comparative, intercultural representation of the experience of war in cultural production has produced the Group's strongest and most original work. With its genuine interdisciplinary and international scope and its emphasis on culture in the sense of 'cultural artefacts' rather than the sometimes ill-defined 'culture studies', the Group's work has established it as being innovative while remaining focused, and it is seen by scholars in the field as revolutionizing the cultural history of war in the twentieth century through its approach based on the concepts of representation, memory and identity. Its annual conferences have taken as their themes areas such as myth and propaganda; memory and the representation of war; legacies of war; humour as a strategy in war; and war, narrative and the idea of 'nation'. Symposia and other events in London and Bristol have considered subjects such as violence and language; war, art and medicine; war, community and the visual; and women and war.

The *Journal of War and Culture Studies (JWCS)*, with this first issue produced twelve years after the Group came into being, signals a further development of its work. The subject of war and its impact on world cultures is potentially vast and the *JWCS* has a broad but clearly-defined research field, taking as its principal focus the relationship between war and culture in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, primarily in Europe but not excluding other areas involved in conflict, although these will retain a focus on their relationship to Europe. The short position papers and the three articles selected here to found the journal, and written by members of the Editorial Board, represent a cross-section of the GWACS's work and its approaches to the study of war and culture. Based on the cumulative and collective experience of the GWACS, the editorial policy here and in the future is one of open-mindedness (not reflecting personal research agendas or particular approaches, nor limiting articles to a particular perspective), but also of coherence. The journal's remit as outlined above is constructed so as to be clear enough to ensure coherence, but to

remain broad enough to attract the best and most innovative work, with the aim of developing further the field of war and culture studies, as the GWACS has done since its inception.

The themes of future issues in Volumes 1 and 2 build on the work of recent conferences: *The Body at War; War and Visual Culture* (2008); *Intellectuals and War; The Figure of the Soldier*; and *The Spanish Civil War in its international dimensions*, commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the end of that war (2009). Some further proposed themes for later volumes include *War and Performance; War, Art and Technology; War, Space, Place and Geographies*; and *War Photography*.

In the position papers here, such issues as the relevance of the First World War and its paradigmatic status as an interpretative framework for understanding subsequent conflicts, and the debates around the notion of 'war culture' are discussed by Pierre Purseigle, while Penny Summerfield explores the complex relationship between film and memory by which the national collective memory is mediated by film rather than necessarily by lived experience. Martin Hurcombe analyzes two different conceptions of the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish and the international, that have developed separately, and explores the possibility of a new understanding of that conflict in recent cultural production. Jerry Kuehl provides a history of war documentary-making, and offers some critical insights into issues of production and authenticity. Bill Niven's broad analysis of memorial culture shows how these apparently static monuments are subject to both interpretational and geographic change. Martin Evans charts the development of war studies from the traditional preserve of military historians to a cultural studies approach, providing a context for the approach taken by the Group for War and Culture Studies. Alison Fell documents the significant emergence of gender studies into the study of war, and where in the past there was resistance to the idea of a link between war and gender she pinpoints exciting emerging trends in which two previously distinct areas now combine productively. In the final position paper, Mikkel Zangenberg makes an argument for placing aesthetics at the heart of war studies and notes that the current bifurcated nature of the study of war has hampered synergies and prevented a full understanding of war, which is precisely what this new *Journal of War and Culture Studies* seeks to remedy.

In the three full-length articles included here, Margaret Higonnet analyzes the phenomenon of battlefield collection by both combatants and non-combatants, apparently differently motivated, but finally both converging as a way of negotiating collective loss. Margaret Attack revisits the Occupation years and provides a reading of texts and films which articulate the French experience of being neither at peace nor at war, resulting in recurrent themes of guilt, sin and shame. Finally, Nicola Cooper brings the study of the representation of war up to the present with an analysis of Bouchareb's *Days of Glory* (2006). Providing a postcolonial critique of the film, she also relates its creation to a strong European trend of memory activism and its effect on national memory and governmental policy.

This short introduction to the history, present and future of the GWACS began with an exclamation and a question: 'War! What is it good for?' Any lover of 1960s and 1970s Tamla Motown music knows the answer of songwriters Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, whose anti-Vietnam War protest song was taken to number one in America by Edwin Starr in 1970.² The vast majority would concur with their answer:

² Originally recorded by The Temptations, Motown considered it too risky to be released as single by them, given their fan base. It had already become well known among the protest movement and the Edwin Starr version made the protest song a popular hit. It was covered by, among others, Bruce

‘Absolutely nothing’. Elaine Scarry (1985) has demonstrated that the ‘structure of war’ and what she terms ‘the structure of unmaking’ are one subject. It is obvious that war, and in Scarry’s analysis, torture, are acts of destruction and ‘entail the suspension of civilization (and are somehow the opposite of that civilization)’; less obvious is that:

They [war and torture] are in the most literal and concrete way possible, an appropriation, aping and reversing of the action of creation itself. Once the structures of torture and war have been exposed and compared, it becomes clear that the human action of making entails two distinct phases – making-up (mental imagination) and making-real (endowing the mental object with a material or verbal form) – and that the appropriation and deconstruction of making occur sometimes at the first and sometimes at the second of these two sites.

(Scarry 1985: 21)

War unmakes, and the artist, writer, poet, or composer makes: ‘we make ourselves visible to each other through verbal and material artefacts’ (Scarry 1985: 22). In the act of war the reality is that the human is destroyed, but what remains is nonetheless intensely human, and the experience of war gathers together the whole of humanity. War is good for absolutely nothing. Yet the imagination (which makes up and then in the case of cultural production makes real), reacts to the impact of war: it may flourish at those moments, of which war is one, when the state tries to close ideas down; it allows us to enter into the minds and deeds of those who are abhorrent to us, and into experiences that we have not known. Indeed at this historical moment in the West, as Val Williams has pointed out: ‘Few of us have any real experience of the war zone. Our comprehension of war comes instead from what we have read and what we have seen [...]. What we make of war emerges from our memories of words and images constructed for us by a hugely diverse collection of journalists, photographers, filmmakers and artists’ (Williams 1994: 9). To which we can add writers of all sorts, poets, novelists, autobiographers and biographers, across the spectrum of cultural production. To talk of the positive aspects of war remains taboo. We know, however that they do exist, not least in terms of technological and medical developments which are then sometimes used for greater social benefit. But war is also good for the economies of some countries – to the detriment of others –, for arms dealers, for exploitation of every sort... and, as Whitfield and Strong wrote, it is ‘friend only to the undertaker’. The collective and individual experience of the work of the GWACS, and now the JWCS, seeks not to answer the songwriters’ question any differently, but to consider in what ways the act of creation (understood in the largest sense of the word) seeks, if not to reverse, then to give imaginative form to the act and effects of war, its consequences and its aftermath, thereby ensuring that the human remains visible, that form is given to an experience ‘objectified in language and material objects’ (Scarry 1985: 255), that is to say in cultural artefacts that are the marks, traces, and legacy of human experience.

Springsteen in 1985, entering the music charts again in 1986, and in the UK by Frankie Goes to Hollywood in 1984.

References

- Scarry, E. (1985), *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, V. (1994), *Warworks: Women, Photography and the Iconography of War*, London: Virago.

Suggested citation

- Kelly, D. (2008), 'War! What is it good for? The work of the Group for War and Culture Studies', *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1:1, pp. 3–7, doi: 10.1386/jwcs.1.1.3/2

Contributor details

Debra Kelly is Professor of French and Francophone Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster, and Director of the Group for War and Culture Studies. Her major publications include *Pierre Albert-Birot. A Poetics in Movement, A Poetics of Movement* (1997) and *Autobiography and Independence. Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French*. In the field of war and culture studies she has published the edited volumes *France at War in the Twentieth Century: Propaganda, Myth and Metaphor* (with Valerie Holman, 2000) and *Remembering and Representing the Experience of War in Twentieth-Century France* (2000). She has also co-edited a double issue of the *Journal of European Studies* on 'Humour as a Strategy in War' (with Valerie Holman, 2001), and published several articles and book chapters on the effects of the experience of war on French and Francophone writers.