

Orientations

Inaugural Conference of the International Society for Cultural History
Ghent University, Belgium, August 28-31, 2008

Call for Papers

The study of culture – whether it be from a regional, a national or a more global perspective – has been central to the humanities for at least two decades now. In this period, we have seen the rise of several disciplinary movements within this ever-expanding domain of research. Cultural studies, cultural criticism, cultural analysis and cultural anthropology are some of the more persistent labels to have been put forward in an attempt to describe and reorganise the field. Given the fact that the study of cultural artefacts and practices nowadays often steers a distinct historical course, the label of cultural history could be proposed as a sort of umbrella-term, comprising the previous ones. But is it, really?

At this four-day event – the inaugural assembly of the International Society for Cultural History that was founded at a successful conference on cultural history in Aberdeen in July 2007 – we want to address a series of fundamental questions about the recent impact and the near future of diverse forms of cultural history. Taking its cue from the fundamental work of, among others, Catherine Belsey, Peter Burke, Lynn Hunt, and Philippe Poirrier, the conference will tackle the vexing question of the precise nature of cultural history. Which disciplinary models and/or critical paradigms can be brought together under this label? Do we actually need such a unifying label? If we do, then what exactly do we understand by it? Are there different, ‘national’ (British, French, German, Italian, Finnish...) forms of cultural history and what distinguishes them from one another? How does one teach cultural history and what does one teach when one teaches cultural history?

The organisers of this conference welcome papers (theoretical, practical or a combination of both) that will enable us to formulate answers to the questions listed above, but also to other issues concerning future “orientations” of the field of cultural history. Where does the field stand, and where is it heading to? How does it relate to other academic disciplines both within and outside the humanities? The label of cultural history is a slippery one, consisting of two no less slippery concepts – culture and history. The past few decades have also witnessed fierce methodological debates concerning the latter term, debates about the theory and practice of historiography, about historicism and presentism, about the irretrievable loss of the past and its stubborn presence, about history and memory, about historical traumas and ways of overcoming them. Did these and other historiographical debates in any way alter the domain of cultural history? Is cultural history a specific brand of history, in terms of the topics that it studies or does it, rather, involve a distinct methodology that sets it apart from other historical disciplines? Should we take cultural history as something different from political history, religious history, the history of science, the history of medicine, the history of art and literature, or does it comprise all of the above? If it does, what are the professional expectations with which cultural historians find themselves confronted? Are they supposed to be true *homines* and *feminae universales* or, rather, *amateurs*, in the positive sense of that word? And what about the inter- or multidisciplinary nature of cultural history?

Apart from proposals tackling disciplinary issues like the above ones, the organisers also very much welcome papers that bring cultural history into practice. Alain Corbin’s book on Louis-

François Pinagot e.g. (*The life of an unknown*, Columbia UP, 2001), dealt both with the methodological difficulties of a cultural historian – how to write the history of an unknown craftsman? how to use archives, the findings of the history of science and religion and of political history to portray the inner and external world of a simple man living on the countryside during the nineteenth century? – as it tried to understand how Louis-François oriented his personal and professional life. The sound of the clocks, the rumours on the Parisian political life, the presence of a schoolmaster or a clergyman, the rhythm of nature, the decisions of parliament and the prosperity of his fellow countrymen organized the life of this simple, unknown man. In terms of more traditional disciplinary markers, we welcome contributions by political historians, historians of science and medicine, art historians, historians of literature and music, specialists of the history of philosophy and religion, etc.

By opting for the notion of “Orientations” as the conference’s key-word, the organisers also want to suggest that cultural history is actually all about the art of orientating – oneself, one’s group, one’s region, one’s country, one’s world. Paper proposals (400 words max.) should be sent to both jurgen.pieters@ugent.be and alexander.roose@ugent.be. Deadline for submission is January 15th, 2008. Notification of acceptance will be given before March 1st. Those invited to speak at the conference will be expected to become members of the ISCH before July 1st, when the final programme will be posted. Further information on the ISCH can be found at <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/isch> .

Keynote speakers include:

Moritz Bassler
Fernand Hallyn

Catherine Belsey
Pascal Ory