

Sensational Events - Narrative, Material, and Visual Expressions

Call for Papers: The 18th Annual Graduate Conference in European History (GRACEH)

15-17 April 2024

European University Institute Florence (EUI) / ZOOM



What constitutes sensible methodologies, and how do we imagine, construct, narrate and visualise senses and sensations in history?

The GRACEH 2024 focus on *sensational events* employs the word *sense* in its broadest possible meaning. With this, we want to invite historians to think about how we understand and perceive the past, what meaning we ascribe to the objects that we study, the role of sensory impressions, the emotions that are evoked in and by our narratives and how we conceptualise normalcy and sensationalism. What even makes an event sensational? How do we imagine, construct, narrate and visualise senses and sensations in history? In short – how do we make sense of history?

In making sense of the past, we also need to explore the sensations of the past. Sensibility in historical research encompasses not only the emotional life of our subjects but also our sensibility as historians, how we represent lived experiences in our narratives and how we understand subtleties and cultural expressions across time. The importance of sensational events in historical research has varied over time, returning from time to time in new forms. Whereas they were once the lens through which we studied the actions of political elites, today they serve many different functions. Through the sensational, we can learn more about everyday life. Sensational events can serve as windows through which we can follow people who would never otherwise emerge in our sources. But what significance do we attribute to sensational events, places and people in our research, and how do we navigate these meanings?

The conference is open to graduate students at all stages of research. We invite graduate students working on different topics and periods on a national, international, transnational, or comparative scale to explore the place of sensations, emotions, ideas, and senses in their projects. We encourage contributions with novel and diverse perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches. GRACEH 2024 warmly welcomes participants to join in person. While we offer a limited hybrid model, we emphasise fostering an engaging in-person experience.

Possible topics include but are not limited to:

1. (In)sensitivities and (res)sentiments - History of emotions

How did people express and embody grief, shame, love, and anger in the past? Do we consider feelings and emotions of the past as something natural or socially constructed? What role did, for example, emotions play in the outbreak of the French Revolution? Or what kind of event would enrage a 16th-century servant? Presentations within this topic could explore the historical role of feelings, affection, performativity, emotional communities, sensibility, and trauma.

2. Sensational Events, People, and Place

What stories can be told by statues, buildings and squares? How did certain events of the past become sensational, and on what grounds? Could sensational events, people and places in history represent society at large? The scope of this theme invites presentations discussing agency, organisation and social movements, actors, orators, revolutionaries, the creation of norms and traditions, narratives, discourses and public speaking, technologies, celebrity culture, scandals and tabloids.

3. Making Sense: History of Ideas, Concepts, and Thoughts

What impact have ideas, concepts, and thoughts had on cultural norms, values, and knowledge systems? How have advancements in communication technology influenced the dissemination of intellectual ideas and the dynamics of public discourse? How did conspiracy theories about the Moon landing affect public perception of scientific achievements and space exploration? What could make a cult successful in the 20th century? This topic can explore the role of intellectuals, the inner senses, ideas, ideologies and mental disabilities in historical research.

4. A Sense of Oneself - (Body) Language and Embodiment

How do we perceive and communicate with our own bodies? How have different cultures and societies interpreted and valued the body? How has our tolerance for pain in dental procedures evolved over time? What can eyebrows tell us about the beauty standards of a specific period? Discussions under this heading may investigate mind-body connections and self-perception; sensory experiences of death, sexuality, pleasure and the body's role in self-identity; embodiment of race and politics; violence, war, and the self in a bodily context; and bodily rituals.

5. History of the Senses

How were the five senses historically referred to, used, and manipulated? How can an understanding of sensory impressions build historical arguments? In this topic, we are looking for papers on the spectrum of (or not) hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and seeing. For example: What did Manchester smell like in 1865? How did the increasing availability of sugar change the taste of chocolate? Presentations within this topic could explore transformations of sensory experiences through fashion, food, ornaments, art, literature, physical disabilities or sexuality.

6. The 6th sense?

How does the embodied experience of supernatural beliefs shape cultural practices, rituals, and societal norms across different historical periods and geographical locations? To what extent did astrology impact historical political decisions? Why did the persecution of witchcraft vary from region to region? This topic opens avenues for presentations about spirituality and dreams, astrology, horoscopes and divination, persecution, witchcraft and sorcery, supernatural phenomena, possessions, and exorcisms.

DATES AND INFORMATION

Please send **abstracts up to 300 words** and a **brief biography (max 100 words)** to: graceh2024@eui.eu by 17 January 2024. Participants will receive a notification of acceptance by 17 February 2024. Final papers (up to 2.000 words) are due 1 April 2024.

This conference is open to all graduate students. We particularly encourage submissions from those who have yet to present their work at conferences or are from underrepresented regions and/or institutions. We hope to be able to support travel and/or accommodation for a limited number of presenters without access to institutional funding. Participants should cover their accommodation and travel through their home institutions if possible.