Workshop - Call for papers

The range of our fears (from Antiquity to the present)

May 15th, 2019 (University of Versailles-Saint-Quentin)

Funk, doubt, dread, terror, fright, horror… There are many words and expressions more or less complex to express the multiple aspects of fear in English and in French.

Understood in its widest meaning, fear can be defined as an emotional answer to an external stimulus. It is an emotion of anxiety lived by one or several individuals in front of a real or hypothetic danger or a threat. It can be conveyed by physical and psychological expressions, ranging from primal reactions such as an out-of-control behavior, paralysis, shouting, shaking, and anxiety, or on the opposite side of the spectrum an energy boost, a vigor of mind and a brave behavior. Lived in an intimate or in a collective way, fear flouts any rationality and remains an ambiguous and kaleidoscopic emotion bound to the imagination and to the individual or social beliefs. Studies of Damien Boquet, Pyroska Nagy and Frédéric Chavaud have shown that fear is a social construct that seems to vary and evolve over time, depending on the place and the different levels of a society. Deeply unstable, it acts like a mirror distorting the reality and it tells something about the social group in which it takes root. Fear can the origin of other antithetic emotions as anger or joy. It can take many forms from the fear of death to food phobias. When fear is transmitted collectively by an oral or written culture, it may become epidemic and could pressure the whole social group.

Multifaceted, sometimes construed in accordance with a “construction magique de l’univers”, a magical conception of the universe, humans fears can be divided into two categories nevertheless linked from one another:

- The instinctive fears: they are unchangeable because they are linked to the very human nature. According to Jean Delumeau, they appear from an early age and they bring together fear of the unknown, fear of loss and fear of death – “l’innommable”, the unspeakable, according to Philippe Ariès. These fears are invariant in human societies. They have several expressions such as dread caused by the presence of a dead body, fear of the dark, fear of foreigners and more generally fear of others, etc.

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1 Reading the article related to « peur » in Pierre Larousse, Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle, Paris, Administration du Grand Dictionnaire universel, tome 12, 1866-1877, p.736 and the column « lexicographie » of the Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales (CNRS) [cnrtl.fr].
- The contemporary fears: these are the consequences of specific events such as natural disasters, conflicts or epidemics. Increasing by the insecurity feeling of populations for a given period of time, these fears are evolving and recreated depending on eras: from ancient famines to modern nuclear and chemical weapons. They can be strengthened by the presence of individuals considered as harmful and badly integrated into the social fabric (witches, murderers, thieves and marginalized individuals).

Understood through the prism of cultural history, fear can be observed as a habitus (theory of the “pédagogie de l’effroi” of Alain Corbin among others). It can be used as a pedagogical tool, the subject of a voluntary narrative form in a cathartic action for exorcism (in order to mention the unmentionable and to make it understandable) or simply as a pastime. It spreads in art fields, performing, cinematographic arts, literature, media (press, radio and television) or music. It can be diverted from its primary meaning in order to become the main subject of certain cultural productions and activities that do not hesitate to appropriate it and depict it as a way to deal with it, to transcend it. This is shown by the frescos painted on the walls of the Sala della Pace of the Palazzo Pubblico of Sienna in Italy by the famous artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti between 1338 and 1339. Daughter of the “histoire des représentations”, fear history is both one of the inalterability and one of the permanent reinventions of an individual or collective subject through different eras. Fear is the place for a theatricalness because it covers several faces. Lived by, manipulated by, sublimated, aestheticized, changed in a conscious or unconscious way, fear participates in the masked game from the ancient world to the present time. Whether it hides behind the Jupiter lightning, as a sign of bad omen into the roman mythology, whether it terrifies Christian populations fearing the verdict of the Judgement Day, lurks in the shadows of the slums in the 19th century fear is an historical constant. It can even be embodied by certain legendary characters as Dracula or Hannibal Lecter, to the delight of the literature and horror movies aficionados.

In a historical, transdisciplinary and cultural approach, this workshop aims to deconstruct and to understand the natural and social mechanisms of fear either endured or desired. First, fear will be seen as an emotion, a sense experience. The individual behaviors will be analyzed when people are confronted to it (How does it appear? How do the societies understand it and express it? What are we afraid of?). The different ways it is transmitted (official and religious institutions, oral culture, profane or popular culture, press, and media) will also be defined. The images, the concepts and the discourses about fear that are tending towards diffusion, creation, perpetuation or even struggle will have to be considered through several perspectives combining comparatist and analytical methods with macro and/or micro scales. The topic of the implemented resources across the ages in order to struggle against its avatars will be also discussed (How do we not worry? How do we exorcize ourselves from our fears? What are the social values of populations that are set up as a model to face fear?). At last, fear will be seen as a social phenomenon. Fantasies that are linked to it and methods that try to aestheticize it will be revealed. Fear’s pleasures from literature, arts, cinema, series or more generally into hobbies will be also studied in the light of a strong emotional quest in order to drop its masks. Five focal areas will be studied:

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7 The « pédagogie de l’effroi » which can be translated into « education based on / using fear », refers to the idea of a deliberate establishment, by an institution or a power, of a repressive system using people’s fears in a way to manipulate them. However, this system which allowed to govern thanks to fear could have opposite effect and drive people indifferent to the spread message. That was the case during public executions, which became well-liked and eagerly awaited entertainments. Reading the introduction wrote by Alain Corbin in Histoire des émotions, Des Lumières à la fin du XIXe siècle, Paris, Seuil, 2016, p.6.

1. Fear as emotion. Feeling and expressing fear

What are the reasons that urge us to feel fear and how do we express it? Are they universal and invariable fears through different societies and times? On the contrary, aren’t certain fears specific to a moment? Aren’t they the reflections of a given society at one specific time? How does fear come forward? What are the different forms of its expression? Can we speak of a “culture de l’irrationnel” (Jean Delumeau)? What is the way (from isolation to anger) of our actions or, on the contrary, our petrification?

2. From the pedagogical tool to the control means

What does fear teach us on ourselves? What is its social use, its part in the education and in the process of individualization. Can we consider fear as an experience in the empirical Kantian meaning? How is fear plowed back in by certain powers and institutions (official, religious or profanes - media for example) in order to exercise control on population? What are the relays of fear? Who are the protagonists who intervene in its large-scale spread? How is fear instrumentalised in order to help interests of a power, an institution or an ideology?

3. Struggling against our demons and domesticating fear

How do we anticipate our fears in order to conjure them (Patrick Boucheron)? How can we be reassured and avoid the realization of our doubts? What are the strategies and practices that are used to be protected against those fears? Who are the heroes and myths that help us fight them? How is fear explained by societies that are living with it? Is it a gender marker? What are the way that make it intelligible? Can we speak of a medicalization of fear?

4. An esthetics of fear

Can we speak of an esthetical construction of fear when it has a narrative form through a written or oral culture, arts, literature, press or more generally words and images? How does fear become an inspiring subject? How do narratives form make fear fascinating? What are the artistic and literary movements that have given to fear its aestheticization? What are their artistic productions?

5. When shuddering becomes pleasure. The hobbies of fear

To what extent is fear an emotion voluntarily desired? How does the desire of thrill become a pleasure, from the ghost stories to the horror movies passing by the literature and the cabinets of curiosities? Isn’t immersing ourselves in danger and fear a stronger and more interesting way to live?

Calendar:
Call for papers at the latest by February 24th, 2019
Answers to candidates at the latest by March 15th, 2019
Workshop “The range of our fears” : May 15th, 2019

Domesticating fear, « domestiquer la peur », according to the words of Denise Jodelet in « Dynamiques sociales et formes de la peur », Nouvelle revue de psychosociologie, ERES, n°12, 2011/2, p.239-256. In this article, she speaks about the concepts of fear eradication and defensive strategies revealing repressed concerns and anxieties. These processes allow us to domesticate fear and live with uncertainty, or even to forget it or replace it. Denise Jodelet also underlines the people’s abilities to face their fear through collective representations, shaped out in public or individual exchanges.
Terms and conditions:
This workshop is multidisciplinary and opened to several fields of research in humanities (sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, art history, medicine history, musicology, literature, theater studies, film studies, visual history, law, languages (?), information and communication science.

This call for papers is addressed to all PhD students and young doctors who presented their thesis defense in 2017-2018.

Each paper will be in French or in English. Paper’s propositions (about 500 words) have to be sent with a short presentation of the author (title, field of the PhD, if necessary year of the thesis defense and the university or the affiliated organization) at the latest by February 24th 2019 at the following address: doctorants.chcsc@gmail.com.