



International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies

Seminar for Early-Career Scholars

June 30 – July 4 2025

Call for papers

The International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS) is pleased to announce a call for papers for the 2025 International Seminar for Early-Career Scholars. Each year, the Seminar brings together emerging Eighteenth-Century researchers from numerous countries, across all geographical areas without restriction, across all schools or disciplines.

In 2025, the meeting will take place from June 30 to July 4 at the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon, France. It will be organized by Sophie Audidière (Université de Bourgogne-Franche Comté, Société française d'étude du dix-huitième siècle, SFEDS) and Maria Susana Seguin (Université Montpellier III, Institut Universitaire de France, representing both the Asociación argentina de estudios del siglo dieciocho, AAESD, and the Société Française d'étude du dix-huitième siècle, SFEDS).

This year, the Seminar's theme will be "The Eighteenth Century and Possible Worlds".

Research has shattered the myth of a motionless Eighteenth Century, mired in its social orders and classes. Not only was the Eighteenth Century in constant motion, it never ceased to affirm that other worlds were possible, not only in the form of utopias, but also pastorals, operas, political novels; it gave them shape through treaties, projects, paper architectures; it even built them, and lived them. This Seminar aims to explore the presence of possible worlds within the world of the Eighteenth Century itself, whether they were present, really possible or not quite possible. It will seek to understand the ways these complete and complex worlds were made, as well as what they meant for those who produced them.



The Eighteenth Century and Possible Worlds

“Possible worlds”. We employ this expression in the same way as history of possibilities, when it asks “what if?” (Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravellou, 2016). By definition, the century did not know where it went. It was a large polyphony of possibilities that existed as such, that could be heard, read, felt, practiced and reflected upon. As such, the history of possible worlds in the Eighteenth Century was not just a thought experiment, but a history enriched by what had really been possible, a history told, conceptualized, analyzed, or dreamt of by contemporaries, a history they did not see as external or alien, but as a possibility of their own present world. Possible worlds thus could be heard in operas, pastorals, or novels; in political philosophy, narrative utopias, political economy; and even in carnivals, at the theater, or in living communities. The great descriptive sums of the world themselves, encyclopedias, astronomical texts and histories (of travel, of the two Indias...), were also inventories of possible worlds. Eighteenth-Century studies have thus been part of a general trend, which, for several decades, enabled multiple disciplines, such as sociology, history, philosophy, literature and aesthetics, to restore their critical dimension by placing the notion of the possible at the heart of their concerns.

Our hypothesis is that the proliferation of possible worlds was a way of representing, in a concrete form of expression, a key category of the Eighteenth Century: critical thought (Bertrand Binoche, 2018). We aim to understand how men and women have produced critical thought in the shape of possible worlds. The plural is important: if there are possible *worlds*, it is because a *possible* world always describes one *world's* nature as intrinsically relative to other worlds.

Our collective discussion will seek to define what a world is, not as a segment of human life, but as a world in the full sense of the term. As a hypothesis, one might consider that a world should be viable and livable, rather than projections of artificial, eternal beings, free from the vicissitudes of change, such as the Leviathan. To think on the scale of a world, one must also define possible worlds as opposed to utopias, because the category of narrative utopias (Racault 1991, 2003, 2010, 2020) is not adequate for all expressions of possible worlds, even literary ones. Possible worlds also ask an ontological question, and require one to distinguish between the possible and the phantasmagorical. Finally, the possibility in question might not be that of progress (and even more so not that of *Progress*), nor perfection or perfectibility, but nonetheless relates to knowledge and science. On the other hand, each flourishing possible world opens up politics to imagination, acting as a space for experimental inquiry that is also rooted in reality. Imagination investigated, as an example, the colonial experience. Possible worlds could be, for instance, an Eighteenth-Century China that had more coal mines (Kenneth Pomeranz, 2006, 2009), or a world in which the Flight to Varennes was successful (Mona Ozouf, 2005). As such, the issue of possible worlds comprises *uchronia*, both as a literary genre and as a methodology.

The proposed Seminar shall be interdisciplinary. It shall aim to highlight uncertainties and discontinuities, to denaturalize history and weaken teleology, and to explore the powers of imagination and fiction, not only in literary texts, but also in knowledge, experience and theory. History might be discussed as it relates with fiction, politics with imagination, practices with poetics and neology, philosophy with play, *uchronia* with the cartography of boundaries, science or philosophy with discursive modes other than causality.

Suggested topics

1. Possible worlds and critical thought: Are possible worlds a non-melancholic form of critical thinking? Can they be emancipatory endeavours?
2. History of possibilities (alternate or counterfactual) has notably focused its inquiry on colonialism and slavery. What can literary, philosophical and artistic studies bring to this discussion? In the same way, how may we consider “feminine” possible worlds (not to be confused with worlds of women)? How may we consider the category of “restorative literature”?
3. The status of possible worlds: Does generating possible worlds mean actualizing a real possibility of the present (a potentiality), possibly linked to the past, perhaps even dialectically? Are they inventions? What is the status and ontology of these productions?
4. Generating worlds or failed worlds: Is there a poetics of possible worlds? How do intellectual and scientific practices relate to a methodical production of possible worlds? What is the effectiveness of unreality in experimental research? We may also consider “crippled, failed worlds” (“*mondes estropiés, manqués*”, Diderot): what can be made of these failed productions, of the fact that these worlds were made and then unmade and dispersed, under the very eyes of those who discovered or invented them?

Submitting a proposal

The Seminar is limited to 12 participants. Proposals must be based on an original research project. Preference will be given to scholars who are at the beginning of their academic careers, near the end of their PhD, or with a PhD (or equivalent degree) awarded six years ago or less. Official languages are English and French. Passive knowledge of both languages is mandatory.

Applications must include the following information:

- a short *Curriculum Vitae*, including date of PhD (or equivalent), or planned date of completion
- a list of recent publications and academic presentations
- a brief description of the proposed seminar paper (one page, single-spaced)
- a confidential letter of recommendation (sent separately by the recommender)

Deadline for applications: January 30 2025.

Applications must be sent by email, with proposal and CV attached, to the following addresses:

sophie.audidiere@u-bourgogne.fr

susana.seguin@ens-lyon.fr

Travel and accomodation

Participants will be offered travel reimbursement of up to 400 € (600 € for candidates outside of Europe) each to facilitate their participation in the Seminar.

The organizers will cover the accommodation costs. Meals will be served on site, or near the

meeting venue.

Programme

The programme will include keynote lectures, presentation of article projects by the participants, critical readings of a selected bibliography and meetings with the academic community. The programme also includes excursions and visits to heritage institutions.

Paper presentation

Each of the 12 participants is invited to give a 30/45 minute presentation, followed by a 20-minute discussion with the other participants and the organizers. Powerpoint presentations are welcome. Participants may send a written version of their paper ahead of time, which will be circulated among all attendees.

The critical bibliography that will be discussed during the Seminar will be circulated 4 to 6 weeks prior, so participants can review it beforehand.

Each participant may also be asked to chair another session, to consolidate their chairing skills.

Publication

As in the case each year, the Seminar papers will be published by Honoré Champion (Paris) in the "Lumières internationales" series.

