



## Discovering the Human

Life Sciences and the Arts in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries

International Conference at the Department of English and American Studies

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

10 - 12 September 2009

According to common scholarly opinion, the eighteenth century is not an era particularly famous for its groundbreaking scientific discoveries. Considering the innovations in the so-called life sciences, e.g. the emergence of modern neuroscience or the experiments of Galvani, this belief may be disputed. Although the eighteenth century undoubtedly also has to be characterized, as the late Roy Porter has pointed out, by the terms "acceptance", "consolidation", and "assimilation", the scientific landscape of the era, as latest research has emphasized, is much more complex and has a lot more to offer. In this context, the conference will focus on the life sciences, i.e. medicine, natural philosophy, physiology, psychology, and, at the close of the century, the emerging discipline of biology, in order to highlight how the discovery of the human is both the result of transformative processes as well as new discoveries and insights.

For the contemporary concept of the human, these transformations were indeed groundbreaking since they brought about a shift from the previous worldview dominated by religion to the modern scientific one. Science, hence, became an accepted cultural reality in the age of reason and in romanticism and was, as such, reflected, commented on, and criticized in literature and other cultural discourses. At the same time, traditional religious viewpoints remained of major importance in all major scientific disciplines. The conference aims to reflect the parallel and often contradictory discourses contributing to the construction and/or discovery of the human.

As the concept of the human was altered due to the gradual spreading of scientific knowledge, so did the depiction of the human change in literature and the arts. Since the two cultures, art and science, were not yet distinguished categories but rather closely intertwined, the modern concept of the human is a result of scientific-aesthetic negotiations.

The complex debates revolving around mechanism, vitalism, and materialism in order to define the nature of life in general are a case in point. The mechanistic physiology in the tradition of René Descartes that had replaced classical medical models such as the theory of the four humours gradually, as the century proceeded, made way for more holistic notions such as vitalism and a materialism based on the conception of the human and animal body as a self-sufficient organism, which is the prerequisite for the discovery of the human. And at times it is hard to say whether central texts, such as the works of Erasmus Darwin, are to be called science or poetry.

Possible topics for papers are:

- The body as a scientific organism in the arts
- Imagination and scientific theories of the mind
- Gendering the sciences
- Neuroscience in literature and art
- The scientist as a literary topos
- Creating the human as a monster in science and art

Please send an abstract of 200-300 words and a short CV by e-mail to Prof. Dr. Ralf Haekel (Ralf.Haekel@phil.uni-goettingen.de) or Sabine Blackmore (sabine.blackmore@staff.hu-berlin.de) by 1 December 2008.

For more information, please visit our website: [www.discoveringthehuman.com](http://www.discoveringthehuman.com)

Conveners:

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