

Call for papers - Sapienza University of Rome in collaboration with the Critical Media Lab, McGill University, 29 February - 2 March 2024

## **Making, Unmaking, and Remaking the Real in and beyond Ethnography**

Modes of making, experiencing, and explaining the world and its possibilities that diverge from a positivist understanding of what reality is have long posed a challenge to ethnographic inquiry. Sometimes arguably labeled as “extraordinary”, phenomena such as spirit mediumship, the practice of magic, the risk and possibility of witchcraft, the dissonant excess of madness, the ecstatic dimension of religious experience have haunted ethnographers since the beginning of the discipline.

In the last decades, the emergence of postcolonial and reflexive perspectives has opened new horizons. When facing the manifold manifestations of powers afferent to the magical, the spiritual, and the unseen — deemed to be superstitious and out of place within a tradition of thought indebted to scientific materialism and disenchanting humanism — ethnographers resolved to different forms of engagement that led to quite distinct sets of reflections.

As magic, spirits, and their powers pose questions and complicate many universalistic claims to knowledge, they also prompt epistemological and methodological dilemmas for the researchers. The necessity to take such phenomena *seriously* has been strongly called for by scholars from many different angles. But what does “taking it seriously” mean? On one hand, defying the Weberian notion of the “disenchantment of the world” as the core of modernity, a great deal of literature has by now shown us how such magical, religious, and spiritual experiences, practices, and discourses are not only part and parcel of modernity, but also inextricably tied to it. Though - we might add - it is important to stress that this bind is anything but neutral, as it is generally embedded within a specific framework of containment, dismissal, and othering. On the other hand, some researchers have particularly focused on the ways in which the magical, the spiritual, and the religious can be transformative in and beyond fieldwork, as they are capable of putting into question - and sometimes even disrupt - an understanding of the “real” rooted in the positivist-secularist-colonialist nexus that still informs academic production today.

Asking whether an ethnography of modes of making, unmaking, and remaking the real that does not reduce its voices to culturalist and essentialist frameworks

is ultimately possible, we are interested to go beyond this polarity. In order to do so, our discussion will be organized in three main streams open to paper, screening, performance, and workshop activity proposals:

1) How and why do ethnographers take up or mobilize the “extraordinary”, and what is the impact of this choice on their positionality? To what degree can the practice of ethnography challenge, reinforce, or instigate a shift in the understanding of what is real and what is not? This section welcomes contributions that reflect on the relation between the ordinary and extraordinary in ethnography. We would like to interrogate the forms through which knowledge about magical, spiritual, and religious practices and experiences is reproduced. How can we render these practices and experiences within and beyond the boundaries of scientific production? What is the place occupied by the “extraordinary” and the “occult” in the history and practice of Western political imagination? What are the challenges that multi-sensorial forms of knowing pose to the canonical textual ethnography and the opportunities opened by engaging with the languages of audio-visual media and the arts?

2) How do power structures and epistemological hierarchies shape, or confine, the realm of the “extraordinary”? Is there space for the invisible, for instance, within the methods of historical materialism? Following the previous one, contributions to this stream would address magic in relation to colonialism, capitalism, racialization, and white supremacy through ethnographic and historical approaches. Critical interventions that thematize the nexus between accessibility, transparency, and opacity of knowledge production are strongly encouraged. This stream would also attempt to explore the possibility to make space for the “extraordinary” in past, present, and future abolitionist and liberatory practices.

3) We might say that extraordinary events are those that cannot be assimilated into everyday understandings of how things are, and how the world works. Such encounters with spirits, magic, and other beings often, but not always, occur in the face of different forms of pervasive violence (e.g. structural, everyday, political). The fact that such events and experiences are difficult to put into words is one reason that simply speaking or writing about the “extraordinary” often falls short—it fails to acknowledge the fragmentary and imagistic way extraordinary events are thought, remembered, and communicated. What can thinking *with* and *in* images offer to the theorization and representation of extraordinary events? We encourage contributions of scholars and practitioners

working with images of all kinds: e.g. dream images, sound images, film images, theater images.

These are only some of the questions we would like to address in this workshop by creating a dialogue between different perspectives that nevertheless share the aim of digging into the complexities of reality-making through the prism of the magical, the spiritual, and the unseen.

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