

Invisible Lives, Silent Voices in the British Literature, Arts and Culture of the 20th and 21st Centuries



invisible lives
silent voices

Informations pratiques

Conférence en ligne, via l'application Webex Cisco

Dates: 15-16 octobre 2020

Conference organised jointly by the research units EMMA (Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone) and IHRIM (Institut de l'Histoire des Représentations et des Idées dans les Modernités), with support from ED 3LA and ED 58.

Keynote speakers

- **Guillaume Le Blanc**, Université Paris 7 – Paris Diderot
- **Dr. Esther Peeren**, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)

Summary :

The aim of this international conference is to address the processes of invisibilisation and silencing in 20th and 21st-century British arts, literature and culture. Invisibility is the result of power dynamics wherein dominant ideologies, groups or individuals silence precarious and vulnerable ones to political, economic or social ends. The voices of the precarious, who remain 'outside of power' (Le Blanc) are undermined by that of the majority, and sink into deeper and deeper silence, resulting in social, political and even psychological dispossession. As Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou claim, 'the logic of dispossession is interminably mapped onto our bodies, onto particular bodies-in-place, through normative matrices but also through situated practices of raciality, gender, sexuality, intimacy, able-bodiedness, economy, and citizenship' (18). Normative discourses and practices thus give way to asymmetrical relationships which deny vulnerable populations the ability to speak up and fully exist. Figures of non-conformity such as minorities, immigrants, women, along with the disabled and the poor are all in dissonance with such oppressive and normative dynamics, raising the question of political and social representation in our contemporary societies - one that deserves to be addressed in light of recent events in the British Isles.

The political turmoil caused by the results of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 is one of many examples of the problematics of invisibility, as some members of the British society were not given proper representation in the referendum, while others who do not always have a say expressed their views. This conference will further the discussion on the divisions that are

tearing the British Isles over Brexit, but it will also allow us to extend Esther Peeren's work on Britain's 'living ghosts', i.e. 'undocumented migrants, servants or domestic workers, mediums and missing persons. These groups were chosen because all are frequently – sometimes to the point of cliché – likened to ghosts or related figures, on the basis of their lack of social visibility, unobtrusiveness, enigmatic abilities or uncertain status between life and death' (5). The in-between status of invisible lives and silent voices, who are neither fully integrated in society nor fully excluded from it, raises the question of the geography of the invisible which resonates in contemporary British literature, suggesting a possible repossession of lives and voices through fiction.

We will also have the opportunity to tackle the mental health struggles and psychological vulnerability of those who remain on the margins of society due to a physical or a mental condition or impairment, with their history of being subjected to social taboos. The private, emotional turmoil of mourning, for instance, was documented by theorists and psychoanalysts throughout the 20th century and well into the 21st century. As anthropologist and author Geoffrey Gorer wrote in 1965: 'giving way to grief is stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing [...] if one can deny one's own grief, how much more easily can one deny the grief of others; and one possible outcome of the public denial of mourning is a great increase in public callousness' (113). The silencing of mourners has evolved since the end of the 20th century, since some of them have regained public visibility, with the rise of the 'grief memoir' genre and the partial rehabilitation of 'melancholia'. However, other invisible portions of society (for instance mental patients, be they institutionalised or not) remain largely ostracised. The process of claiming back their voices leads all those silent and invisible lives to a tentative reconfiguration of their identities, as Vanessa Guignery argues: 'by articulating their suffering, by speaking out and speaking back, the unsung and unheard fight to come to terms with the traumas they have experienced and to reconstitute a sense of self, identity, memory and history' (6).

What defines the processes of invisibilisation and silencing? Who decides who is to be visible or not? Can silence and invisibility be a conscious choice, an act of resistance? Is literature a way to give a new voice and a new visibility to the left-behinds? Or does it also fall prey to the power dynamics responsible for invisibility? These questions will guide our conference and will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of British society and culture in times of crises.

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