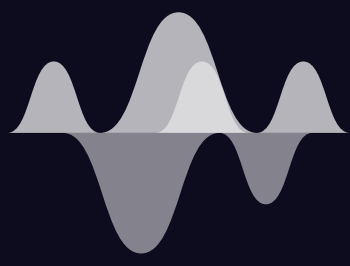# invisible lives
silent voices

This interdisciplinary and international seminar proposes to examine the various forms of social invisibility and the silencing of individuals and/or groups of populations. 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 2009) are undermined by that of the majority, and sink into deeper and deeper silence, resulting in social, political and even psychological dispossession or dehumanisation. 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 oppressive and normative dynamics, raising the question of political and social representation in our contemporary societies. The recent series of events in 2020 and 2021, which targeted Black and Asian populations in the US and in Europe, reasserted the need to address questions of integration, recognition and visibilisation.

Such an investigation requires constantly asking whether some groups (researchers and scholars included), by speaking for the other, are not participating in erasing and silencing them. This seminar aims at questioning the perspective through which we consider invisible lives and silent voices, all the while examining the discursive frames in which they can freely emerge or willingly disappear. Creating a discussion around the invisible and the silent is - in a neoliberal context fueled by individualism, indifference, conflation, and threatening pandemics - crucial to shift back power to the marginalised and to ensure diversity and polyphony, in opposition to "a monopoly of voice whose narrative effects strongly contribute to invisibilise certain lives." (Le Blanc).

We propose to investigate those processes of invisibilisation and silencing through multiple frameworks, methods and approaches: literature, music, cinema, cultural and visual studies, history, sociology and philosophy. These invaluable sources will further our understanding of invisible lives and silent voices: 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? Can art be 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?
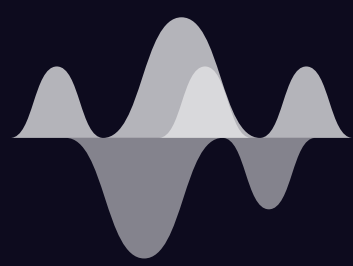
Migrants and refugees: transient ghosts

We aim at exploring the liminal status of migrants and refugees (defined by Esther Peeren as 'living ghosts'), in societies that often choose to relegate them on the fringes and leave them in a limbo between life and death. The in-between status of invisible lives and silent voices, who are neither fully integrated in society nor entirely excluded from it, raises the question of the geography of the invisible, as the spatial configurations of refugee and migrant camps can attest. The banalisation of their journeys in the media calls for a change of focalisation as regards migrants' and refugees' narratives, while their relegation as commodities (often confined in precarious menial jobs) has to be addressed as part of a marginalising apparatus. This shift of power and focus is essential so that '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' (Guignery 2009).

(Un)veiling genders

In the light of the field of gender studies, this theoretical perspective questions the politics of gender that influence the making of artistic canons and norms. Particular attention will be paid to the relative invisibility of women in the literary, artistic and musical canon, and to contemporary attempts to reintegrate and rediscover them. Recent currents of feminism also aim to put an end to the stifling and invisibilising effects of essentialisation by giving a greater visibility to women of different origins, skin colours and cultures. Postcolonial, decolonial, intersectional, feminist, and queer angles of analysis tend to destabilise the normative discourses and complexify the strictly binary categories that lead to stereotypical representations.

The cracks in hegemonic gender representations will lead us to explore the hidden vulnerability of some men, those alternative masculinities that are frequently silenced in the name of a stereotypical and mythical version of virility. As Stephen Whitehead claims in his study of Men and Masculinities (2002), "being at the centre can serve to hide, obfuscate, confuse, obscure". It seems to us crucial to engage with the paradoxical invisibility of men, both at the centre and on the margins, in order to explore the too-often obscured manifestations of male vulnerability.

Vulnerability and disability

We will also endeavour 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, and have been historically subjected to social taboos. After decades and sometimes centuries of repressed histories, the liminal categories of the mentally ill – as well as the dying or victims of trauma – have started regaining a paradoxical form of public visibility with the emergence of vulnerability studies. By removing the blindfold of prejudice, the articulation of those liminal experiences strives to contest previous denial and circumventions in official or normative discourses.

As the sanitary crisis has shown, the questioning of the comparative value of a life has been thrown into relief by countless emergent situations in the past months. Though the disabled and the elderly have been dismissed as suffering from incapacitating physical and mental conditions, their marginalisation is not solely the result of particular health conditions but is rather to be considered "as a political and socially constructed problem" (Watson, Roulstone and Thomas, 2012).

Circumscribing disability as an incapacity to live a normal life points to the political rationality behind the inclusion/exclusion of the disabled: they are deemed "unfit" to comply with a designated health model fostered by the very same institutions initially constructed to help and assist those in need. The disabled therefore enter, and are confined in, a state of inbetweenness which caters for their needs (by creating, for instance, pensions and government subsidies) while creating new ones (insufficient pensions in comparison to inflation). As "industrialization, urbanization, changing work patterns and accompanying ideologies" fostered the creation and development of prejudices (Barnes 2012) against the disabled and the elderly (who suffer from physical/mental impairments and become unable to contribute actively to the neoliberal system), questions arise about the possibility for new polities and spaces of vocalisation and visibilisation, ones which will recognise without stigmatizing, acknowledge without characterising.

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