

From Places to Milieus of Knowledge Towards an Ecology of Savant Practices

Involving ten young researchers from Italy, Turkey, and France, at the crossroad of the history of science, the history of cartography, urban history, the history of technology, and colonial history, this research programme is still at an early stage of its development, gradually taking shape as we collegially think, write, erase, correct, and re-write through a contrasted variety of *media* and milieus such as workshops, emails, and online collaborative platforms. Through a wide array of case studies as well, ranging from the field studies of the ruins of Persepolis during the eighteenth century, to the making process of a map of the Bosphorus in Enlightenment Istanbul, to the foundation of a zoological gallery in nineteenth-century Lyon, and extends to the examples used in the present proposal.

For this ESHS First Young Scholars Conference, we would like to propose a symposium session starting with a quick theoretical introduction and followed by three case studies chosen among our many topics of interest. Thus, illustrating and fleshing out a yet too conceptual endeavour, this would also allow us to put things into perspective and thrive on the ensuing discussion.

The media of knowledge

Recent developments in *media* studies have led philosophers to emphasise the role played by mediation in a broad sense, conceiving of a *medium* as what lies in between two alterities and that at once enables and constrains, materialises and shapes our perception, understanding, and manipulation of what there is (Barad, 2007). A *medium* is never neutral: it has an effect on what it conveys by shaping it in a certain way so as to make it visible, and by embedding it into a regime of signs so as to give it meaning. Yet a *medium* is never visible from itself: mediation enacts signification while at the same time erasing the effects of this enaction. The *medium* evades while unveiling (Mersch, 2006).

Although social scientists have long used this concept to study mass medias, and the transmission, circulation, and alteration of information (e.g. McLuhan, 1967), scholars in the history of science or anthropology of knowledge would benefit from reappraisals (Kittler, 1986) and new developments (Stiegler, 1994-2001; Dourish, 2017) in the philosophy of technique understood as a *medium*: how does a peculiar object such as a terrestrial globe and its material life always-already re-enact the face of the Earth? How does the use of ink-and-paper inscriptions define the realm of what is knowable and shape our knowledge of the world? How do physicians reconfigure a space such as a church into the practical place of knowledge that is a field hospital? And, reflexively, how does the multiplicity of *media* the scholar is confronted to – manuscripts, microfilms, interviews, digitalisations, objects... – impact on his or her discourse?

From medium to milieu

The successive shifts undertaken by research programmes such as that on “places of knowledge [*lieux de savoir*]” (Jacob (ed.), 2007, 2011; Jacob, 2014) or, more recently, on “home-for-science” (Geissler and Kelly, 2016) seem to us to betray a wider – yet unacknowledged – turn towards an understanding of science in *medial* terms. At the crossroad of the anthropology of knowledge, the sociology of science, and the philosophy of technique, we would like to further this turn.

First, shifting from materiality to materials – broadly understood as “the stuff that things are made of” (Ingold, 2011) –, we endeavour to account for the ever-changing nature of things subject to a milieu that shapes, wither, and alter them – *media* being a species of milieu. Thus, rather than bluntly taking things as the material, yet passive, repository of human intentionality only (Appadurai, 1986), we intend to focus on the never-ending efforts for savants to crystallize *things* into immutable *objects* of knowledge – liable to circulate without being altered – through a certain use of dedicated *media*.

Second, thereby taking into account this indeterminate dynamic of *medial* objectification entails a shift from places to milieus of knowledge. By paying attention to the indefinite material and social practices of (re)definition and stabilisation of places of knowledge, the latter appear as unstable and dynamic *milieus* which need to be re-enacted daily (Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013, 2015) so as to take shape as immutable *places* of knowledge – liable to be dwelled by savants.

An ecology of savant practices

Indeed, as the recent work of the artist Tomás Saraceno shows (Saraceno, 2018), the subject, rather than freely roaming a crystallised place of knowledge, is always-already inextricably enmeshed into a milieu that he or she influences, and whom it influences in turn. As the savant can only seize the world through a sea of mediation devices in which he or she is immersed, such *media* always generate their own ecology of knowledge by redefining the realm of what is knowable, reconfiguring practices, restructuring the state of knowledge and forms of scholarly subjectivities (Rotman, 2008). Consequently, we suggest replacing the geographical acceptance of places of knowledge with an *ecological* understanding of milieus.

This acceptance calls for an ecology of savant practices (Waquet, 2015, 2018) redefined as the study of the *media* and the practices of re-enactment that allow for the crystallisation of things into objects of knowledge, and of milieus into places of knowledge. *Contra* Bateson (1972), such an ecology of savant practices should be attentive to the meshwork of the becomings of *media* and milieus, rather than to a hub-and-spokes network of already-given objects and places of knowledge (Ingold, 2015, 2016). Thus, a nineteenth century construction site in Marseille appears as an ever-reconfigured milieu where technical *media* are put into practice and adapted to local constraints, while the colonial museums of fascist Italy become a diffuse milieu scattered across local embodiments of an instrument of mass propaganda and power.

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