ICI Lecture Series Scale – 9 December 2024, 19:30, in English

Michael Taussig
Fairy Castles Gliding Like Swans:
A Meditation on Drawing While Writing

While Michael Taussig writes a book-length account in Istanbul of his time in a village in northern Colombia besieged by paramilitaries, he draws what is happening outside his window. How these two channels of image and text come, don't come, and partially come together is the elusive subject of this talk, resonant with the precarity of the villagers in such a situation no less than of the images emitted through the interstices of the text. How could these different states of awareness coexist, intermingle, and even feed off one another? In this regard, one thought came to stand out and that was his becoming aware of scale.

Michael Taussig is Class of 1933 Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Columbia University, NYC, and is known through his several idiosyncratic books from 1980 onwards concerning *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America, The Nervous System, Mimesis and Alterity, The Magic of the State, Walter Benjamin's Grave, Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Colombia, I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown, And the Garden is You, and Corpse Magic: Ecoes Active in the Slayer-Slain Nexus*.

Lecture Series Scale Scales are used to quantify properties such as length and temperature, or also to measure popularity and affect. But as Alice discovers in Wonderland, a change of scale can also have dramatic qualitative consequences. It disrupts customary ways of perceiving, acting, and being — to the point of feeling as 'queer' to her as a caterpillar's metamorphoses. Helped by the arguably inextricable intertwinement of different meanings and aspects of scale, Alice's experiences continue to provide apt metaphors for the disorienting importance and effects of scale and scaling at a time of hyperglobalization and the so-called anthropocene.

Scale is indeed a highly ambiguous notion, even when one only considers the meanings deriving from the Latin or Italian scala, ladder. It simultaneously denotes the whole ladder, one of its steps, and the relation between two steps: The scale of a cartographic map is the ratio between a distance on the map and a distance on the ground, but any particular length also defines a scale, and the range of scales from the subatomic to the planetary scale is part of the spatial scale. Paradoxically recursive, scale combines and helps mediate quantity and quality, as well as subjective perception, objective material properties, and contingent construction.

If different disciplines, discourses, and dispositives each have their privileged scales to which they tend to reduce others, what may be gained by thinking them together, acknowledging both the relative autonomy of particular scales — each with their own affordances, limitations, rules, even laws and ontologies — and their interdependence — each affecting and being affected by other scales? What is the critical purchase of developing multiscalar architectures or patchworks of scale-specific, mutually inconsistent and irreducible descriptions, theories, and models? How might the tensions be made productive where they overlap or come into contact? The ICI's Lecture Series 'Scale' will address such questions by reflecting upon the critical role of scale within and across a wide range of different fields.

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