

Per-Markku Ristilammi:  
Stealth

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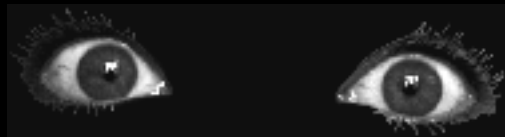
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# STEALTH

*Per-Markku Ristilammi*

We have a situation where cities and large companies are competing for investments on a global market. Prestige projects are built in order to draw attention to locality. Every city wants its own Gehry-Guggenheim museum in what could be called “The Bilbao-effect” (Foster 2002). In this case architecture can be seen as sites of spectacular spectatorship. One example of this would be the award-winning Turning Torso apartment tower project in Malmö.

But in contrast to this focus on visibility the events of September 11th may have led to a reconfiguration of the relationship between visibility and non-visibility that has been one of the fields of tension within modernity. Being invisible has come to mean being secure. But if security becomes ever more important these forms of spectacular buildings also become potential targets. If we connect this fear of visibility (cultural scopophobia) to event marketing practices connected to place, we can question if the current trend for constant visibility through branding is viable. Maybe we can find other analytic metaphors, in order to better understand identity formation connected to place, and *stealth* could be one of them.

*Stealth* – any military technology intended to make vehicles or missiles nearly invisible to enemy radar or other electronic detection.<sup>1</sup>

Military strategy has, at least since the end of the 19th century, become an art of knowing when to be invisible and when to emerge into visibility. The development of weapons technology has meant that

everything that is visible is a potential target. Dwarfing and extending fields of vision has been at the core of modern warfare. Stealth has also been one way of dealing with the consequences of the need for disciplining organization. Being under the “perruque” has always been an art of the weak (de Certeau 1984; Scott 1985), but has also strategically been a technique deployed by those in power.

One could tentatively argue that the events of September 11th have released a renewed interest in the art of cloaking, considering that exposure seems to be a threat, regardless of location. Will we see an opening for a new set of performative practices, practices that return and use the (modern) technique of camouflage? These dystopic renderings point to the need for meaningful camouflage techniques (see Hansson in this volume).

Stealth obviously requires an element of camouflage, but stealth has the additional feature of being an offensive technology. Stealth could then be defined as camouflage used in order to reach operative goals. The logical ending of a stealth process is a surprise attack where the victim/enemy is either destroyed “before they knew what hit them” or rendered incapable of effective defense by the sheer force of the attack.

Hostile takeovers on the stock market are preceded by stealth processes where information is being kept at a minimum and only a small number of people are involved in the decision making process. Stealth is therefore not primarily about being hidden from visibility. It is more about finding the right

moment in time/space to become visible. These kairos processes can be seen in the corporate world, increasingly in national and international politics, but also on a smaller scale in informal economies.

And then I thought that if I was ugly, I would turn into something new, something dark and slippery like a stealth bomber or a manta ray, and I'd go wherever I wanted and nobody would know, and I'd be happy like I could never be happy before (Ivy in *Savage Girl* by Alex Shakar).

The character Ivy in Alex Shakar's 2001 novel *Savage Girl* is a schizophrenic fashion model who cuts herself in order to gain anonymity. As the story continues the effect is quite the opposite. She becomes a super model in a world where marketing is everything and where she has her own website with a camera that records everything she does in her apartment. This is a world with, what Baudrillard would call *obscene visibility*, where the reality of the former world, where it was possible to step off the scene, no longer exists. But as Ivy's attempt to gain anonymity shows, like a stealth bomber or a manta ray, visibility is not meaningful without its contrast.

One way of identifying stealth is to look at various informal economies and the ways companies try to blur the edges of their enterprises. If the new economy was about clear and visible brands, branding can now be seen as a tactic of diversion, of blurring around the edges of the immediately visible.

It is an often noted, but seldom analyzed fact that if everyone in a system would strictly abide by the rules, the system would cease to function. Therefore a formal system, in order to function, must create safety valves of informality and stealth. Invisibility cannot be defined in an essentialist mood. Invisibility must be constructed in relation to visibility. That is why stealth activities always take place in a symbiosis with the visible society.

The most vulnerable moment in stealth processes is the moment of visibility. If this takes place in the wrong time or place, the entire goal of the operation is threatened. Stealth processes therefore require knowledge about cultural geography. Spaces in

themselves are not visible or invisible. The relation between the visibility and the invisibility is always a social one, defined by relations between people, therefore also defining the space of stealth. And if informal space is a social construction, it is also political. Formal, and thus visible, space is often created through the political sphere and since informal space is intertwined with the formal, informal space is deeply political.

The fact that the informal is a social construction also leads to recognition of the fact that informal is processual. People are always located in different stages in the process of moving in or out of the formal, being visible or invisible, in cultural stealth mode or not. Since stealth processes are tools of power, they also give rise to new forms of inequality. This might be a time where the demand for constant visibility in various branding ideologies, paradoxically is turning into a deep fear of visibility, and where this fear is being turned into an increasing demand for control of the visibility of the other. This ultimate visibility can be exemplified by Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "camp" (Agamben 1998), where Homo Sacer, the prisoner outside the law, but inside the power of the sovereign, lives in constant visibility, without any access to the power of cloaking.

## Note

- 1 Stealth. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 18 Nov. 2004 <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9069503>.

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