

CV Dazzle, Anti-Face and the Aesthetics of Transparency

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USS West Mahomet in dazzle camouflage, approx. November 1918 (unknown photographer).i

At the beginning of the 2010's, and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, awareness surrounding the digital surveillance society reached its peak. Overnight, public space appeared to have become a battlefield for algorithms with an eye for numbers, patterns and movements, and with an enormous image bank of stored faces. Ironically enough, it was social media, with its never-ending mantra for an "open and connected world", which pushed forward digital surveillance, and with that the entire business idea of aggregating and selling personal data. Alongside the debates on the individual's right to integrity and *privacy default*, another visual form of critique or resistance developed, which in analogy with its camouflaged purpose, is referred to as CV Dazzle.ii *Computer Vision Dazzle*, sort of meaning *deception of machine vision*, aims to disrupt or make impossible specifically the digital facial recognition, through seemingly simple means: a mixture of colourful make-up, asymmetrical haircuts, and partly covered nasal bridges and eyes, yet under the threshold of the anti-mask laws that are being introduced in an increasing number of countries. The trick is to delude the omniscient eye in a creative way. It is not a question of becoming invisible, but rather to become offensively yet bewilderingly visible for the human eye – to hide fully visible in plain sight or to become an optical illusion. In front of the decoding gaze of the surveillance camera, a so-called Anti-Face remains clearly visible but unrecognisable, and therefore both transparent and opaque at the same time; opaque as body, transparent as identity. A transparent opacity?

After all, CV Dazzle is only the post digital era's way to disappear by obfuscating. Camouflage colours and war paints, with a sometimes nearly modernistic visual language, have existed as long as the military establishment. The freight ship SS West Mahomet, which was launched nearly exactly one hundred years ago, is one of many examples of an aggressive visibility that pushes the boundaries for the opaque in one way and for the transparent the other way. Here, the logic of war and the aesthetics of resistance;iii (sic!) obtain somewhat futuristic or cubistic characteristics. The purpose of both CV Dazzle and the historic Dazzle camouflage is to keep the monocular and flat gaze of the camera, periscope or binocular occupied with deciphering, calculating and matching search parameters. Their colour and form patterns simply makes it difficult to optically determine the exact position of the object, speed and the direction of travel. This is an interesting side-effect of CV Dazzle: the algorithms are forced to execute over and over again and thus end up in a loop, thereby diminishing the entire effectiveness of the surveillance.iv To some extent, both military power and civil resistance use the same colour- and form palettes. If one cannot disappear, one needs to confuse.

Publicity photo Modern Art Museum in Stockholm. The exhibition *The New Human/Hito Steyerl How Not to Be Seen*

Perhaps, it is in the light of a long heritage of German fear for surveillance and a love-hate relationship to the abundance of hyper-capitalistic digital images that one can read the art work *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File* by Hito Steyerl from 2013.^v The work, which is a one-channel film together with objects relating to the film, consists of five inter-linked parts, or rather “lessons in invisibility”, with the following mid titles. 1. *Make something invisible for a camera*, 2. *Be invisible in plain sight*, 3. *Become invisible by becoming a picture*, 4. *Be invisible by disappearing*, and 5. *Become invisible by merging into a world made of pictures*. For an excellent description of this piece, read [Karolina Pahlén’s text](#) *Hito Steyerl – upplösning bestämmer synlighet, det som inte fångas av upplösning är osynligt* (“Hito Steyerl – Resolution determines visibility, what is not captured by resolution is invisible”) in VERK 01 – 2017, January – March, Tema: Störning, ISSN 2002-2735

It is a rather multifaceted art work, situated in between the genres of instruction film and slapstick, with many examples of^{vi} disappearances pulled out of the magic box of film technology. The images, text, voice and music of the film are set against one another, as in the tagline of the title *A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File*, which is full of the ironic characteristics that repeat themselves in disguises and fully visible effects. The ridiculous is in sharp contrast to the seriousness behind the lessons (total global digital surveillance) and contributes to a twisted ambivalence.

The central graphical element of the film appears both as real scenes and as objects, and is reconstructed in each installation: a series of line patterns similar to zebra crossings on a tarmacked square in the middle of the Californian desert, previously used for calibrating surveillance cameras of the American Air Force.^{vii} A similar black and white calibration card is used as a graphical backdrop in the film and strongly resembles the camouflage of SS West Mahomet. Once again – the logic of war and the aesthetics of resistance use the same visual language. Nowadays, the calibration plot is abandoned, and tellingly enough, today a model with the pixel as the smallest calibration unit is being used.

Against the digital super-visibility, which risks transforming everyone to images, Steyerl here poses a series of strategies for invisibility, investigating different levels of transparency. But does the one who manages to disappear still exist? In a world where the digital paradigm has become hegemony, i.e. where the image is more real than the body, a faceless human is soon gone for real. Steyerl’s synthetic voice recites it clearly: “In the decades of the digital revolution 170.000 people disappeared. Disappeared people are annihilated, eliminated, eradicated, deleted (...).”^{viii} If we become transparent to extinction, what other forms of resistance or freedom then remain?

Steyerl is utile for a few different discourses on the depicted/depiction and she has reached stardom in the art world. But I wonder if she does not sometimes get lost in Marcuse's forest and loses the critical edge that distinguishes her thought process. There are many disparate grasps and audio-visual divergencies that risk becoming self-contradictory in the heavily wound-up tone, and many meta-sequences are "uncovered" as their own elegant tricks, without really getting anywhere. Is Steyerl not quite comfortable in the digital limbo after the camera? For me, the *object*-scape in her more recent practice is an emergent aspect, none the least on the basis of the exclamation "why not become an object?"^{ix} against a feminist orientated norm critical position. I cannot make my mind up whether she, at times, under- or overestimates her audience, or both. She both captures and is captured by the one-sided transparent incarcerations of the post digital society: each time you look into your screen, pad, or mobile, you and your clicks become visible, whilst the screen and its algorithmic power become transparent.

The principle of public access to official documents is "Central in the Swedish legal system. This entails that the public, often individuals and representatives for media, are entitled to have free access to information about the activities of the State and the local authorities".^x The concept is strongly associated with a typical Nordic openness, even though similar "sunshine laws" and freedom of information exists in more than 70 countries. Therefore, the public and openness holds a synonymous clang in our ears. Governmental power should be able to be called upon by the individual, not the opposite. But what happens with the practice of transparency and aesthetics in a digital openness?

The principle of public access to official documents, as a structural lens to observe and consider decision-making powers, is applied successfully in the publication *Direktupphandling av kortfilm om medicinsk åldersbedömning* ("Public procurement of a short film on medical age assessment") by Carl Johan Erikson and Björn Larsson. The printed matter functions as a highly complex examination of the process behind the film *Medicinsk åldersbedömning* ("Medical Age Assessment").^{xi}

Erikson and Larsson, who during many years have successfully actualised the photographic book, both as a medium and as a method to publish photographic projects according to their specific conditions, have here succeeded in maintaining a congenial intertextual format for their project. So what does the publication actually illuminate and how is it to be read?

The cover to Direktupphandling av kortfilm om medicinsk åldersbedömning by Carl Johan Erikson and Björn Larson as part of Vägra döda – historier om de vapenfria männen (Refuse to Kill – Stories of the Conscientious Objectors), an artistic research project. Vägra Döda, 2018. ISBN 978-91-639-8413-6. The project is financed by Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council) and is conducted at The Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm. Printed at Elanders.^{xii}

I read it as an inverted Russian doll: for every babushka that I open, an even larger babushka hides inside! In fact, published in this reprint are the public documents requisitioned from Rättsmedicinalverket, RMV (The National Board of Forensic Medicine), which form the basis for the decision- and production process behind a commissioned film on medical age-assessment of asylum seeking teenagers that cannot prove their age with identity papers. The pages of the book are filled with governmental directive prose, tenders, e-mail conversations, script versions, film shooting schedules and invoices. The cover, in turn, is adorned by a screen dump of the final film from the YouTube channel of Rättsmedicinalverket. The only editorial addition, besides the choice of cover and page format, constitutes of a simple page of contents, as well as anonymised contact details. From a commercial perspective, this could be described as the book behind the film with additional bonus material, a retrospective meta script, or just a bureaucratic audio commentary that is longer, larger and deeper than the actual film.

What distinguishes the film^{xiii} is its target group and intended audience, namely the asylum seeking teenagers that are subjected to the age assessment, which is carried out with the help of a combined dental x-ray and MRI examination. With linguistic simplifications and the stereotypical setup of information films, the examinations are to be played down and in such normalised. It is all boiled down to one hot topic: just like in the Cinderella tale the right to asylum ceases when the body clock tolls 18 years. Based on images from the x-rays and the MRI scan as the sole forensic material, a forensic report is written upon the probability on whether the asylum seeker is over or under the age of 18. Migrationsverket (The Swedish Migration Agency) uses this report as part of their assessment on whether the person should be considered a child or an adult. In others words, embedded in the film and in the non-fiction prose of the procurement is a highly dramatic turning point with potentially extreme existential consequences.

Contrary to the digital activism of CV Dazzle and Anti-Face, there are no means to protect oneself against or confuse the hyper transparent gaze of the x-ray- or the MRI camera. The relationship is rather the opposite: transparent as body, opaque as identity. Because what is age (as opposed to lifetime) and how is it visible? Is it a bodily function or a condition for identity? This depends on who is passing judgement on the images and in what way and with what instrument this person is reviewing, assessing and finally deciding. This is where the authority's pursuant desire for photographic evidence comes to a head: to depict a specific age, and therefor determine a destiny.

The publication bears similarities to so called *feedback loop*, or as Wikipedia so splendidly explains the concept “outputs of a system are routed back as inputs as part of a chain of cause-and-effect”.^{xiv} The more the publication unfolds the details surrounding the process together with the desired and unintentional consequences, the more the awkward transparency, that in particular the cover gives way for, is strengthened. Because, deep inside the largest of the Russian dolls, the spot-light is aimed towards the most controversial, uncertain and legally deficient methods with which someone's age can or should be determined. Erikson and Larsson draw no conclusions and make no analyses, neither in text nor through images, but leave everything

to the attentive reader, completely in accordance with the aesthetics of transparency with which they succeed in exposing also the photographic loop: this is the book behind the information film behind the MRI camera's image of age.

Screen dump with focus on the municipality Ydre, from the interactive map over the municipalities of Sweden that is presented at <https://undervaka.se/kommuner/> (CC BY _SA 4.0 Undervaka.se)

With the unstable political climate that prevails, it is difficult to predict the future for both public procurements and documents. The statutory transparency is one thing, but how it is implemented is another. Today, many government bodies and authorities bypass the entire process through hiring recruitment agencies or other middle hands to procure staff, products and services without the possibility for insight. Amongst different municipalities, counties or authorities, the knowledge about, the resource to, and perhaps even the desire to hand out public documents, differ drastically. This became clear in the project *Undervaka*^{xv}, a project that has mapped the principle of public access to official documents. The openness index of Sweden makes up a motley map of more or less transparent regions and municipalities. The statistical colour codes provide for different interpretations. I note that Ydre is the municipality in Sweden that is the poorest at handing out documents, especially in a digital format, and I wonder what the underlying reason could be. But this can be a matter for someone else's project. In the meantime, I am satisfied acknowledging that the film *Händelser i Ydre*^{xvi} ("Happenings in Ydre") assumes an everyday and intimate perspective. Perhaps the municipality's lack of transparency makes up for a much-needed zone of opacity for its inhabitants.

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- i PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE BUREAU OF SHIPS COLLECTION IN THE U.S NATIONAL ARCHIVES. CATALOGUE: #19-N-1733
- ii AN EXAMPLE OF ANTI-FACE LOOKS FROM THE WEB-SITE: [HTTPS://CVDAZZLE.COM](https://cvdazzle.com)
- iii HERE THE TEXT PLAYS FREELY WITH THE TITLE OF THE NOVEL BY GERMAN BORN PETER WEISS: WEISS, PETER, *MOTSTÅNDETS ESTETIK: ROMAN. BD 1*, 1. UPPL., ARBETARKULTUR, STOCKHOLM, 1976
- iv SEE THE DIDACTIC AND VISUALLY INTRICATE AND OPAQUE IMAGE COLLAGE FRMO 2014 WITH MANY EXAMPLES OF CV DAZZLE AT [HTTP://DISMAGAZINE.COM/BLOG/8115/ANTI-SURVEILLANCE-HOW-TO-HIDE-FROM-MACHINES](http://dismagazine.com/blog/8115/anti-surveillance-how-to-hide-from-machines)
- v [HTTPS://MOMA.ORG/LEARN/MOMA_LEARNING/HITO-STEYERL-HOW-NOT-TO-BE-SEEN-A-FUCKING-DIDACTIC-EDUCATIONAL-MOV-FILE-2013](https://moma.org/learn/moma_learning/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013)
- vi HITO STEYRL, *HOW NOT TO BE SEEN: A FUCKING DIDACTIC EDUCATIONAL. MOV FILE*, 2013 (INSTALLATION IMAGE FROM THE EXHIBITION *HITO STEYERL: TOO MUCH WORLD* AT THE INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART, FORTITUDE VALLEY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA, 2014) http://www.randian-online.com/np_review/the-beautiful-one-has-come/

- vii SEE THE WHOLE FILM AT THE WEB-SITE OF ARTFORUM <https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-51651>
- viii <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61298/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>
- ix <https://www.regeringen.se/sa-styrs-sverige/det-demokratiska-systemet-i-sverige/offentlighetsprincipen/>
- x RÄTTSMEDICINALVERKET (PUBLISHED ON 16 MAY 2017): “WHAT IS A MEDICAL AGE ASSESSMENT? IN THIS FILM WE EXPLAIN THE PROCEDURE STEP BY STEP. AMONGST OTHER THINGS YOU GET TO JOIN US ON A DENTAL X- RAY AND A MRI SCAN. BASED ON THESE EXAMINATIONS RÄTTSMEDICINALVERKET MAKE AN MEDICAL AGE ASSESSMENT AND A FORENSIC MEDICAL PRACTITIONER WRITES A REPORT. IN WORDS IT EXPLAINS THE PROBABILITY FOR A PERSON BEING UNDER OR OVER THE AGE OF 18. MIGRATIONSVERKET THEN USES THIS REPORT AS PART OF THEIR AGE ASSESSMENT AND DETERMINES WHETHER OR NOT THE ASYLUM SEEKER SHOULD BE CONSIDERED A CHILD OR AN ADULT.” READ MORE AT THE WEB-SITE OF RÄTTSMEDICINALVERKET: www.rmv.se
- xi CONGENIALLY ENOUGH THE BOOK IS PRINTED AT ELANDERS TRYCKERI THAT HAS “MORE THAN 40 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AS A SUPPLIER OF PRINTED MATTER TO THE PUBLIC SECTOR”. <https://www.elanders.com/swe/tjanster/trycksaker-till-offentlig-sektor/>
- xii THE FILM IS AVAILABLE AT <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mnv9tNWbo1k&t=36s>
- xiii IT HARDLY NEEDS TO BE POINTED OUT THAT THERE IS AN ENORMOUS INDIVIDUAL AND GENETIC SPAN FOR HOW THE BODY GROWS AND HOW YOUNG OR OLD IT APPEARS TO BE, WHICH IS ALSO THE REASON THAT SVENSKA BARNLÄKARFÖRENINGEN (THE SWEDISH PAEDIATRIC ASSOCIATION) REJECT THE ABOVE MENTIONED PROCEDURES. SEE <http://www.barnlakarforeningen.se/2017/11/23/brev-till-regeringen-angaende-medicinsk-aldersbedomning/> NEGRA EFENDÍĆ AT SVENSKA DAGBLADET (A SWEDISH NEWSPAPER) HAS INVESTIGATED THE SUBJECT MATTER IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES: <https://www.svd.se/om/svd-granskar-aldersbedomningarna> EVEN THE BAR ASSOCIATION WITH ANNE RAMBERG AT THE FORE HAVE SPOKEN OF THEIR CRITICALITY TO THE METHOD OF WHICH THEY CONSIDER BEING LEGALLY UNRELIABLE: <https://anneramberg.wordpress.com/2018/10/27/om-saklighet-och-aldersbedomningar-tva-oforenliga-storheter> AS WELL AS https://www.advokatsamfundet.se/globalassets/advokatsamfundet_sv/nyheter/brev-fran-sveiges-advokatsamfund-till-mikael-ribbenvik-rorande-medicinska-aldersbedomningar-pdf
- xiv <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%85terkoppling>
- xv <https://undervaka.se>
- xvi <https://www.folketsbio.se/film/handelser-i-ydre/>