

Sea Harbour People - Mimesis, Camouflage, Masquerade

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Photo : Sinziana Ravini

The Visible and The Invisible

Finally back in Gothenburg and the same old discussion with the cabdriver about which way to drive to my place. The tunnel, except in morning traffic while they are repairing the bridge, is at least six minutes faster. We are talking about Södra Älvstranden, the harbour stretch in the centre of Gothenburg. He is rather appalled that the city is using this central part of the harbour for cargo shipping and how this creates heavy traffic. I like his strong opinion and maybe it is that simple; trucks or people.

I have been reflecting on how to work in public space as an artist for some time now and recently trying to understand the complexity of Södra Älvstranden. There are different ways of thinking of ones relation to a place; it can be as a user, an observer and a performer. In fact, we cannot choose one role or the other since they are all interrelated. In the concept of “becoming” the distinction between place and people gets blurred and the interconnectedness becomes evident. Yet, in this text my focus is the role of a performer in trying to understand a place. I consider the performing act as one way of judging a place, something we do most of the time unconsciously. My second focus is on how places perform acts, involving and using us. Therefore I turn to visibility and invisibility and especially to the concept of camouflage because of its strategic nature. The concept of camouflage is highly elaborated in the book with the same name by Neil Leich¹. In everyday usage camouflage is connected to war

1. Leich (2006)

and invisibility but as Leich points out it engages a double meaning of revealing and concealing simultaneously. Like the chameleon it is an interaction and play with the environment:

*All in all, we have a picture of a creature which, at different moments, seeks either to blend in with its environment or to stand out, and relies predominantly on a visual register to survive and prosper. It therefore serves as an emblem for our own human obsession with appearances. The chameleon is a creature of fashion, using visual techniques to articulate its identity. And even if the popular assumption that the chameleon changes color as a defence mechanism is indeed a myth, it nonetheless remains a potent analogy for human behaviour. We human beings tend to adapt not just to our environment, but also to the behaviour, appearance, and characteristics of those around us. We are creatures of fashion.*²

I would like to reassess the common understanding in Sweden that school uniforms are evil things. Let us for a moment imagine children getting up in the morning dressing up in uniforms ready to go to school. I am sure the Swedish Harry Potter generation would not mind. The uniforms would of course differ in looks and style between the different schools, allowing us to distinguish the children attending “good” schools from “not so good” schools. The schoolchildren would by this create visual landmarks in public space for us to see and relate to.

My question is; if we are “walking fragments of the society”³ as Castoriadis suggests, what would this statement of appearance do, in order to change our identity as a town or a country? School children would still be “reproducing the institution” but in a more visible and acknowledgeable way.

How would our sense of identity transform in relation to this everyday visual demonstration of the differentiation of Swedish public schools? Is there a common belief in Sweden that what is not seen is not there? No visible differentiation equals no differentiation in power or status? This example shows that institutions can be invisible and that changes of institutions can be camouflaged.

Because of this aesthetical change of public space as in the example of the school uniform, we would have to consider a new identity for ourselves, society and place. We know that the connection between people and institutions are double and two-way, but it is a manipulative communication, and not truly reciprocal in power. I have found camouflage and appearance interesting because in this area some of the unconscious strategies of all parties can surface.

As stated above, visibility and invisibility are of interest in the power relations in public space but also in how we define public space. The identification of a place is not a productive method but identification *with* a place has the potentiality to make us engage and connect to a place and by this produce something. I therefore turn to the sociologist Erving Goffman⁴ for another perspective. He is putting forward a sociological level concerned with community life, everyday life and experience. Goffman shows that the perspective of the everyday life is something that is of importance to actually gain a better and more accurate sense of society at work. I would like to criticise the overemphasis on institutions and commercial investments when trying to

2. Leich (2006:79)

3. Castoriadis, C. (1995)

4. Goffman (1959)

analyse and understand public space. To include only a few interests in an analysis, is in itself a production, the production of an image of how things work. This is a camouflage act, a practice governed by the desire to conform and to assimilate.

I believe that unorganized, self-indulgent and individual actions have a way to create social transformation. Some say that this claim argues against the idea that social movements always have to have the character of organized collective actions. In the article "*Goffman and the study of everyday protest*", T.K. Oommen⁵ provides examples that show that everyday forms of protests can not be dismissed as irrelevant. Oommen points out that those who castigate everyday protests misses the point that the nature of protest in a society or social setting is closely related to and determined by the nature of its social structure. That is the reason why in Iran, but not in Sweden, a woman who plucks her eye-brows and wears a printed shawl instead of a black one can be arrested. In the book *Persepolis*⁶ by Marjane Satrapi we can follow the intricate double life in Iran and the fight for a little more freedom in the form of a shorter shawl of a few inches. The fear of wearing too much lipstick and being caught by the guardians of public moral is an extreme case of a social structure at work. But in a society of the Swedish kind where power is of a much more invisible character, the possibility or the problems of protest becomes of another nature. How to protest in a culture where normality is the camouflage that swallows every language of protest?

Mimesis, Camouflage and Masquerade

Our society is a performing and visual culture and it is connected to mimesis. Mimesis is a term used by Walter Benjamin and he connects it to the human capacity to recognise similarities, implicating imitation. Both Adorno and Benjamin saw this as a way for humans to forge a link between self and other and between people and environment. For Benjamin mimesis is highly connected to the process of alienation in the 20th century (and 21st century) and a way for alienated people to recognise something of themselves in the environment.

Here, mimesis is not merely imitation but a creative and re-interpretational act. It is a process of creating meaning and it is questioning the simple parting of object and subject and of people and environment. It is not seen as imitation but as assimilation connected to empathy with the other. For Benjamin mimesis is a way to find meaning, through the discourse of similarities, and by this reconcile and treat the alienation of the 20th century.

Mimesis is not only an aesthetic concern; imagination is at work in the mimetic process. Imagination is necessary in order to give purpose to space and activity. Also memory is part of our identification and interpretative process. Memory is inescapable because of its connection to our ideas and identity. But memories are not only connected to the individual, communities have imaginations and memory, and so have the spaces of the communities.

Camouflage as in mimesis engages a process of "becoming other" and seeing the self in the other. This urge to become the other is deeply strategic and a survival mechanism. Identity on the other hand depends on an individual's ability to distinguish itself from its surroundings. Camouflage operates here between two extreme states; the first being a withdrawal into the self which means a complete distinction of the surroundings and second a loss of the self

5. Oommen (1990)

6. Satrapi (2005)

which means a complete assimilation into the other. Both of these extremes are scary to us, it seems as if we are the most content somewhere in between. One example of an extreme state of assimilation lures in the fear of darkness. In complete darkness we lose sight of our own boundaries leading us to feel a loss of self. The fear of darkness could therefore be interpreted as a fear of losing oneself.

Both assimilation and distinction are important in camouflage and identity. Identity can be said to be set in the dialectic of distinction and assimilation. In relation to appearance this would be the dialectic of “standing out” and “blending in”. By this we can conclude that the urge to identify with or to stand out from our surroundings in terms of appearance is only the epiphenomenon of a deeper psychological urge to assimilate or differentiate ourselves from our surroundings, an urge which is grounded in questions of identity.

Assimilation and blending in can be a survival mechanism, when hiding from aggression. Therefore the hegemonic culture is a strategic one, what is at risk in the priority of safety is the possible loss of self and identity.

In urban western cultures relating to dress, the tendency is to choose materials which are simple, dark and with structure preferred over pattern. This can be interpreted as blending in with 20th century architecture and its emphasis on open spaces and material and its denial of ornament. So by blending in with the buildings we can think of this as blending in and assimilating with the institutions. In order not to lose ourselves completely the counterpart of blending in is also needed. Standing out can also come in form of how you talk, the choice of cars or other identity markers than clothing. Something needs to be different in relation to the background; jewellery and haircuts are most favoured and small details as for example flower prints or strong colours inside the cuffs of men's shirts. So what is balanced in appearance is not only a power struggle but a strategic act of fear of overdoing the “standing out” or “blending in” and by this either becoming completely cut off from others or losing identity entirely.

One more concept is of use for this text, the concept of “becoming” as used by Deleuze and Guattari⁷. It is an interactive process and a destabilization of what is already there and forces every entity involved into a genuinely creative response. Here it is not a question of imitating some entity, so much as entering into its logic. It is a way of entering into a mutual reciprocity where everyone is affected. In the process of “becoming” things are *constantly* moving, there can be no definite background or environment or for that matter defined inhabitants. The people and the environment of a place are therefore both producing subjects, entering into each others logics and by that forces a creative response to happen.

These ideas create new questions in relation to a place like Södra Älvstranden. Can an environment be more or less dynamic? Can an environment have a will of its own? Is the use of a place an illusion; is the place rather using us? Does a place have its own memories, fantasies and desires? And whose desires, imaginations and memories are valued?

The Desire of a Place

In darkness a city presents itself in a different way, what is important is usually spotlighted while the rest is left in shadows. In the shadows there are possibilities to hide or to shine on parallel arenas than the official. The area next to the harbour in Gothenburg has a long history of being an environment with hidden

7. Leich (2006)

places where party people can get into serious entertainment and showing off themselves. Therefore the harbour has a vague shimmer of nostalgia from memories of dark nights and early mornings.

Recently I had the opportunity once more to visit one of this dark harbour places when I visited a “Burlesque Party” on a boat. This became an interesting experience of masquerade and sexual desires. Everyone at the party was in costume, people entering without any costume was offered a mask as a minimum of disguise. There were a lot of people in drag, I was myself dressed up as a male ship fleet owner from the seventies. Because of the uncertainty of gender or identity behind the masks, the flirtation in this place was in full swing and while trying to establish if you were looking at a man or a woman, the gazes of desire were at work without effort. The boat was rocking gently and the whole atmosphere was in constant motion. The usual relation to others and the environment became something more of an adventure and the waving motion of the experience dissolved the normal line of expectations.

The show consisted of different acts inspired by Berlin burlesque shows, including a most intriguing trapeze act. High up in the air on a thick rope a man/woman was doing the most fantastic trapeze acts. In this act there was a double excitement – it was of course scary because of the possibility of the artist falling down and also because it was not possible to distinguish the gender of the artist. The oscillation of gender made the whole place reek of sexual desires.

Next to the party another and a longer lasting desire was performed – that of the casino which is one example of how architecture organizes desires at Södra Älvstranden. The casino is a great place to play with fantasies of great amounts of money and possibilities that comes with a large sum of money. The opera house is another example of the organisations of desires – for the people going there it is a way of losing themselves in beauty and in some way attend another form of masquerade: The opera calls for dressing up, to visit the opera is in a way to lift yourself into another sphere and allowing yourself to assimilate or distinct yourself from another background than usual. The actors on stage provide the possibility for the audience to play out their escapism or protest against it. On another level there is also a desire for the city of Gothenburg to play on an international scene, the opera is a way of using culture to make the city noticed. In the small marina next to the opera house the desire for a perfect Swedish summer with long sunny days is performed. Here the desires are organised by the architecture of the small romanticized fishing sheds.

An obvious desire in the area is to own and drive cars. Cars need parking spaces and – even though the tunnel has taken away most of the traffic – the cars and trucks are still what mainly seems to inhabit the space of Södra Älvstranden.

Neither of these places that are landmarks of Södra Älvstranden have a community of people living in them. We are all visitors for a short time, like me, attending burlesque parties or parking our cars in the area. I realise that Södra Älvstranden is charged with desires and fantasies but not with people living there.

But is Älvstranden only a place to visit, a place to pass, for dodgy deeds or cultural adventures like going to the opera or gambling with your pay check at the casino? And how will a residential area fit into this pattern of activities? The question is who will get their desires met at Södra Älvstranden? By including some desires, are we excluding others?





The brothers Cain and Abel can be seen as a metaphor for gentrification. In the story Cain murders the shepherd Abel, and thereby it could be said that Abel is not given access to his desires. Cain is the farmer, the landowner, an image for the institutions that own land or have first access to it. Abel is the shepherd, the drifter and the nomad, the one who cannot claim power through the owning of any land. Because of the constant movement, Abel can not manifest his desires and can not build any buildings to organise any desires either. Because of this Abel becomes more invisible, and the institutions of Cain more visible when it comes to who can act out power. But on the level of the actual place and the streets it might be Abel we meet in the shape of people without homes.

If you look up the saying of "*Raising Cain*" it means "to make a terrible noise". I do not know exactly where it comes from, but in my interpretation there is a warning in the meaning of the words. If we raise Cain and not take any notice of Abel we might get a public space which has the character of constant conflicts and not multitude.

Having discussed the relationship between people in a place it seems as if in this process the place itself is forgotten. But back to the question; does a place have an identity and desires of its own? Taking a step back and entering the place of Södra Älvstranden from another angle, I come back to the concepts of camouflage and becoming, where the place is also a subject with an activity.

Judging from the numbers and statistics of clothes sales in Sweden, the most sold colour in Gothenburg is marine blue. Could this be seen as a mimetic gesture to the Sea, is the Sea somehow the background that we will camouflage and differentiate ourselves against? The Sea is of course not marine blue, but the Nordic sea as we know it is of a dark kind. But if mimesis is connected to our imaginative processes the colour of the sea would probably be marine blue. Using colour theory of Johannes Ittens⁸ and his colour wheel it would then be possible to say that the best colour to use if you want to stand out from the environment in Gothenburg would be orange. This is materialized in the orange cranes of the harbour and is a strong visual landmark that produces a sense of identity for the people living in Gothenburg.

I know that the colour marine blue is usually seen in a condescending way but for me it is a love/hate relationship. I dislike the normative and uniforming aspect of marine blue and the lame, "I do not dare to wear other colours than marine blue" but I also admire it. It is a reminder of the shortcoming of humans trying to break free from institutions, but also a reminder of our origin as social creatures, above all social and with a strong sense of needing to *belong*, belong to a place, to people and to the sea.

Getting deeper into the idea of a place and its identity, in Gothenburg the sea becomes a constant companion to people and a cogent shaper of identity of the place. The sea might also act as an invisible tool for division of who feels at home or not. If you have a strong relationship to the sea and know how to act in relation to it, you will feel welcome – if you don't you will inevitably feel out of place. For example, if you ever had any experience of spending time on a sailing boat or if you cherish and enjoy sunbathing you might feel more at ease by the sea than if you don't.

The relationship with the sea is apparently a two faced one, positive and negative with down and upsides, inclusions and exclusions. While looking at a map of Gothenburg it is obvious that the sea is shaped like a sharp knife pushing itself into the land and almost pointing straight at Södra Älvstranden. There is a massive force of the sea and it brings this vast space right in touch with the

8. Ittens (1974)

land of the harbour. The force of the nature and the silence and sounds, the light and darkness of the sea is something that becomes evident when you spend time in the place. In these days of global warming it is not only a metaphorical claim to say that the sea might have some interest in claiming the power of the place. The sea might be the one part of power that are the best camouflaged or in a masquerade costume. Dressed like a wolf in shepherds clothes.

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