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DOI
10.1515/zaa-2023-2045
Publication date
2024
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik
License
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Peeren, E. (2024). Afterword: Running with the Metaphor of Social Invisibility. *Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik* , *72*(1), 81-92. https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2023-2045

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Download date:08 Nov 2024

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Afterword: Running with the Metaphor of Social Invisibility

https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2023-2045

Abstract: In this afterword, I reflect on the contributions gathered in this special issue, which make clear that social invisibility is multivalent, as visibility, invisibility, and the oscillation between them have different meanings and effects in different social and literary contexts. To the points made about social invisibility in the contributions, I add three more. First, after considering social disappearance as a possible alternative to social invisibility, I conclude that the lack of clear boundaries between these two highly elastic metaphors should not be seen as a problem, but as fruitful: running with both metaphors allows us to arrive at a better understanding of the lives led by particular precaritized groups, and to compare these lives across historical and cultural contexts, as well as across approaches and methods. Second, while social invisibility and social disappearance have predominantly been used to figure disempowerment, it should be acknowledged that escaping notice can also empower. A brief reading of Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* illustrates the power self-chosen invisibility may impart to the privileged. Third, I argue that humanities approaches to fictionality and narrative and visual form, as found across different types of art and media, provide ways of thinking through social invisibility that add something valuable to empirical and ethnographic approaches in the social sciences. The main reason for this is that narrative and visual form can defamiliarize our perception of the social world, enabling us to notice again or notice differently what has become unremarkable.

Keywords: social invisibility; social disappearance; metaphor; defamiliarization; Viktor Shklovsky; Don DeLillo

1 Introduction

The contributions gathered in this special issue deal with literary works conceptualizing as socially invisible the enslaved, closeted lesbians, those subjected to social media or totalitarian surveillance, and refugees, situated in a variety of contexts, from the eighteenth-century Atlantic Ocean to late 1970s Ireland, early twenty-first-century London, Silicon Valley of the near future, East Germany before the fall of the

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Berlin Wall, and contemporary Great Britain. In all the literary works discussed, the exhibition of how the marginalized are assigned a form of invisibility that is difficult to overcome is integral to the situated social critiques articulated. What the contributions make clear, however, is that the form of invisibility involved – as well as the literary form through which it is captured – varies, as visibility, invisibility, and the oscillation between them have different meanings and effects in different social and literary contexts. Most importantly, "not all invisibility is disempowering and not all visibility is enabling" (Guttzeit 2024, 5, in this issue).

Social invisibility, referring not to an inability to be visually apprehended but to a lack of social recognition, is a specific form of invisibility regarded, in this special issue, as mapping onto social marginalization. Social invisibility does not necessarily only dispossess; staying under the radar can provide room to act and live in socially unsanctioned ways, as Héloïse Lecomte underlines here (2024, in this issue) with particular poignancy in her analysis of the metaphors of the hood (which covers and provides cover) and invisible ink (which can be read by those in the know) in Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995), and as I have argued elsewhere through the notion of "the agency of invisibility" (Peeren 2014). In addition, several contributors aptly highlight how social invisibility, while withholding recognition (validation on one's own terms), rarely entails a complete overlooking or ignoring. Some form of acknowledgment tends to be involved, usually a reductive one based on the projections of the beholder that designates the socially invisible as threats or disfigurements, to be watched (out for) or to be removed. Consequently, and especially, as Betiel Wasihun points out, in the current age of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019), social invisibility may, paradoxically, imply a heightened visibility. Such heightened visibility or hypervisibility, unlike the self-exposure of influencers, is not chosen by but imposed on the socially invisible: hypervisibility, without caring how the socially invisible might see themselves, lights them up only and wholly as fungible matter, interchangeable bodies to be used up; as matter out of place, dirt to be disposed of (Douglas 2005); as pure screens for the projection of social fears, without depth – a specific form of hypervisibility conceptualized by Akira Lippit as "avisuality" (2005, 32); and as targets for various forms of "necropolitics" (Mbembe 2019).

A question this raises is whether the metaphor of social invisibility, in at first sight (pun intended) denying this dimension of apprehension and instead implying a certain imperviousness (what is invisible cannot be touched), adequately captures the situation of groups facing extreme forms of marginalization that, in decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter's terms, resolutely exclude them from the genre of the human through "*de-extrahumanization*" (2015, 242; original emphasis), legitimating their abandonment or exploitation to the point of death. In this regard, it is perhaps telling that the literature of the Middle Passage discussed by Françoise Král in this issue mainly conceptualizes social invisibility in relation to the looking away from slavery

when it was happening and its being absented from the historical record rather than in relation to the status of the enslaved themselves (2024, in this issue). If, as Gero Guttzeit suggests in his introduction, invisibility studies "runs the risk of becoming what we might call an 'also' field" (2024, 5, in this issue), we may not only need to pay more attention to medium-specificity, as this issue does by focusing exclusively on literary engagements with social invisibility, but we may also need to question the limits of the applicability of the metaphor of social invisibility.

2 Social Invisibility Versus Social Disappearance

For cases where social invisibility appears too euphemistic a metaphor, perhaps another would be more appropriate. Sociologists Estela Schindel and Gabriel Gatti, editors of *Social Disappearance: Explorations Between Latin America and Eastern Europe* (2020), propose "social disappearance." This term was developed in South America around the notion of the *desaparecidos*, referring to "those clandestinely abducted and murdered under Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s" (Schindel 2020, 16). According to Schindel, social disappearance provides a "tool for a theoretical and methodological analysis of social worlds marked by intense processes of de-structuring, de-institutionalizing, and rupturing of meaning" – worlds that produce "contemporary forms of existence that are even beyond what can be encompassed by the vocabularies of marginalization or exclusion" (2020, 16). Interestingly, however, despite being anchored in the historically and culturally specific figure of the *desaparecido*, who was disappeared by the state in a literal sense, this concept, too, quickly becomes expansive, to the point of converging with social invisibility:

> In contrast to social groups that were considered part of the organic structure of a given society in spite of their marginalization, such as refugees (who might one day be re-integrated into a nation-state) or the poor (who are marginal, yet part of the social fabric), these contemporary [social disappearances] are fundamentally deprived of all social inscription and civil protection, with little or no hope of future inclusion. Across the globe, largely *invisible*, uncharted forms of social existence that often remain below the radar of public policies could be thus inquired into through the conceptual lens of social disappearance. (Schindel 2020, 17; emphasis added)

While refugees and the poor of the past are not seen as socially disappeared, "interned refugees," the "long-term unemployed," the "nomadic homeless," and "a range of cases including undocumented, *invisibilized*, clandestine, or trafficked populations" of the present do, it appears, qualify (Schindel 2020, 17–8; original emphasis).

The only demarcation maintained is that between "enforced disappearances" – closely resembling the situation of the *desaparecidos* and resulting from active state persecution – and "social disappearances" rooted in "omission and abandonment" on

the part of the state (Schindel 2020, 20). Even the role of the state – which could provide a useful distinction from social invisibility as extending to the everyday ostracization of those included by the state (such as older women or queer people in countries with legal prohibitions on sexuality-based discrimination) – is not considered essential to the concept. Gatti, in "The Social Disappeared," argues that "disappearance" first evolved from referring to the specific local situation of *desaparecidos* in Argentina to a notion in international law applying to enforced disappearances across the world, and then became a more general category for all kinds of human rights abuses and, subsequently, for "social situations and figures that are difficult to classify but have one thing in common in that they refer to life when it occurs in a situation that becomes an ordinary catastrophe" (Schindel 2020, 51). In the latter phase, it comes very close to what here is called social invisibility: "In social disappearances, the political lies in the organized ways of perceiving reality, in the place occupied by what is visible and what is not, what exists and what does not" (Schindel 2020, 53). Notably, this sentence, which removes the political from state involvement, is accompanied by a footnote referring to Jacques Rancière's (2013) notion of the "distribution of the sensible," used by Guttzeit to frame the exploration of social invisibility in this issue.

This brief turn to social disappearance has not established it as a viable counterpart to social invisibility (even though there are clear differences between what invisibility and disappearance imply, most notably because you can only disappear from a position of presence, whereas invisibility does not assume a prior visibility). Still, the realization that the metaphor of social disappearance, though rooted in a concrete historical phenomenon, is every bit as elastic as the metaphor of social invisibility might be able to assuage some of the anxiety about conceptual metaphors and research fields running wild. Both Schindel and Gatti's volume and this special issue attest to the fruitfulness of the seemingly boundless and partially overlapping metaphors they center, not only for coming to a better understanding of the lives led by particular precaritized groups, but also for comparing these lives across historical and cultural contexts, and doing so across approaches and methods. What the limits of a particular metaphor are might, in the end, always be difficult to determine in the abstract, in theory; perhaps these limits can only be found through its use, with the crucial question being, in every case study, whether any of the findings would have been lost if the metaphor had not been employed. If metaphorical relations are taken as ones of interaction – as involving not substitution but "an active interplay between two terms, one named and one implied, based on multiple, shifting relations of similarity and dissimilarity rather than a pre-conceived identity" (Peeren 2014, 7) – then metaphors always necessitate a thinking through of the relations their terms enter into, which may be tense, paradoxical, or even contradictory. With the metaphors of social invisibility and social disappearance, this entails asking exactly what kind of invisibility or disappearance (and, by implication, visibility or appearance) is at stake

in their use and what exactly they illuminate in the social or literary realm that could not have been illuminated without them.

Crucially, whereas the term "disappeared" was intended by the Argentinian junta to inspire dread and hold off accountability – Gatti quotes Jorge Rafael Videla as stating, in 1979, about the missing: "They are neither alive nor dead. They are disappeared" (Videla qtd. in Gatti 2020, 43) – it was precisely its figurative quality that allowed it to be subsequently taken up as a contestation, "a question and an interpellation to the state: no one just disappears, so where are they?" (Schindel 2020, 35). Similarly, the fact that invisibility is difficult to take literally when applied to people may contribute to its fecundity as a tool for social critique. In my own work, I have used the metaphor of the specter or ghost to look at cultural representations of undocumented migrants, servants, mediums, and missing persons (Peeren 2014). There, too, this metaphor being predicated on a figure whose literal meaning (as the dead returned to life) is subject to question and even when accepted involves some degree of otherworldliness, supports its expansiveness, as opposed to metaphors based on actual experience, such as those of the migrant and refugee, which are rightly seen as less free to stray from this experience. Working with the spectral metaphor – which involved *working it*, somewhat like a piece of clay – allowed me to show how shared aspects of the abovementioned groups' situations were being revealed through the (explicit or implicit) invocation of the same metaphor in relation to them all in literature, film, and television (Peeren 2014). At the same time, I was careful to make clear how each of these groups was also seen to activate different elements of the specter or ghost (including its intermittent invisibility), marking their divergent degrees of disempowerment and agency.

3 The Social Invisibility of the Powerful

The specter or ghost can be a figure of utter dispossession, unnoticed, unheeded, and ineffective in impacting the material world, but also, as Jacques Derrida (1994) in particular has highlighted, a figure exerting, if it is able to haunt, a sovereign power that demands a response. Invisibility, too, can figure a disempowered status of being overlooked as well as a desirable ability to go unnoticed and, like Derrida's specter (Derrida 1994, 6–7), to see without being seen. This special issue emphasizes "figurations of marginalized groups as invisible" within a context characterized by a "disarticulation of *in*visibility and power" (Guttzeit 2024, 4, in this issue), but Wasihun's contribution suggests that, in the age of surveillance capitalism and in the context of totalitarian regimes, invisibility can also be empowering. Wasihun analyzes the pushes towards total transparency imagined in Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) and Wolfgang Hilbig's "*Ich*" (1993) as leading, respectively, to the disappearance of the

individual and the dissolution of the self for the exposed, while those behind the expository gesture remain in control in the shadows. Today, an argument can be made that some of the most powerful in our globalized society enjoy a form of invisibility that consolidates and safeguards their power, while marginalized or “expulsed” (Sassen 2014) groups are ever-more exposed through different, intensifying forms of surveillance, including those of the global mobility regime (Shamir 2005), as well as being increasingly encouraged to self-expose.

For the powerful, social invisibility provides a sanctuary. They are able to stay out of view – and thus to guard their privacy and escape public scrutiny and accountability – in various ways: by living in gated communities, traveling on private jets, and turning more and more public spaces into private property. The history and “afterlife of enclosure,” as analyzed by Carolyn Lesjak (2021), could thus be said to involve the increasing self-invisibilization of the elite, effected through a destruction of the commons that leaves the commoners exposed. A quite literal instance of this self-invisibilization are the underground bunkers some of the mega-rich are building to survive environmental or social collapse unscathed and unperturbed by the masses (Hollingsworth 2020; Rushkoff 2022).

The power of this type of self-chosen, privileged social invisibility is poignantly reflected upon in Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* (2003). The novel’s billionaire protagonist, Eric Packer, is driven around Manhattan in a limousine with blacked-out windows that allow him to see out while nobody can look in. Social invisibility is explicitly evoked when it is noted that “[Eric’s] chief of security liked the car for its anonymity. Long white limousines had become the most unnoticed vehicles in the city” (DeLillo 2011, 10–1). Here, what first appears like conspicuous consumption is actually a move of stealth, designed to keep Eric and his wealth from being noticed and challenged. For extra protection, surveillance equipment has been seamlessly integrated into the car, making it invisible if the limousine were to catch anyone’s eye after all. The aim of the equipment is to light up the world outside, even in the dark: “there were dashboard computer screens and a night-vision display on the lower windshield, a product of the infrared camera situated in the grille” (DeLillo 2011, 11). There is also an interior camera, aimed at Eric, but it is made clear that while “his image used to be accessible all the time, videostreamed worldwide from the car, the plane, the office and selected sites in his apartment [. . .] there were security issues to address and now the camera operated on a closed circuit” (DeLillo 2011, 15). Global self-promotion through full exposure has been replaced by a highly selective visibility restricted to the private realms of the car, plane, and apartment – a visibility, moreover, that is wholly in service of keeping Eric unseen and untouched.

The narrative focuses on the growing sense of boredom and alienation produced by Eric’s armor of social invisibility, which is matched by his wife’s and leads him to barely recognize her when he sees her on the street. Yet it is only after he loses most

of his money by speculating on the value of the yen and his wife tells him she is leaving him that he becomes reckless about leaving the safety of the car. This move into social visibility exposes him to an anti-capitalist protest and, after he kills his chief of security, Torval (an act that signifies a choice to expose himself further), to Benno Levin. Benno is a disgruntled ex-employee seeking to confront Eric: at the end of the novel, Benno holds Eric at gunpoint, while Eric encourages him to go ahead and shoot him. Here, Eric's strategic social invisibility, designed to protect his position of power, intersects with the social invisibility of his would-be murderer, whom Eric does not recognize, not even after Benno tells him that his real name is Richard Sheets, because he was of no interest to Eric even when he still worked for him. For Benno, Eric's telling him that his name "means nothing to me" confirms his social invisibility as only disempowering: "[Eric] said these words into the face of Richard Sheets. *Means nothing to me*. He felt a trace of the old stale pleasure, dropping an offhand remark that makes a person feel worthless" (DeLillo 2011, 192; original emphasis). In contrast, Eric holds power in both invisibility and visibility, as he chooses to make himself vulnerable to the "credible threat" Torval has warned him about (DeLillo 2011, 166): Benno can only kill him because Eric lets him.

The way Eric's social dominance is consolidated across visibility and invisibility is affirmed in his thoughts about what he would like to happen to his remains:

> He wanted to be buried in his nuclear bomber, his Blackjack A. Not buried but cremated, conflagrated, but buried as well. He wanted to be solarized. He wanted the plane flown by remote control with his embalmed body aboard, suit, tie and turban, and the bodies of his dead dogs, his tall silky Russian wolfhounds, reaching maximum altitude and leveling at supersonic dash speed and then sent plunging into the sand, fireballed one and all, leaving a work of land art, scorched earth art that would interact with the desert and be held in perpetual trust under the auspices of his art dealer and executor, Didi Fancher, and longtime lover, for the respectful contemplation of pre-approved groups and enlightened individuals under exempt-status section 501 (c) (3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. (DeLillo 2011, 208–9)

What is imagined here is a spectacle aiming for invisibility through overexposure to the sun (overexposure to light erases images). The plane, which would at first be highly visible and audible, would become untraceable as it reached maximum altitude and supersonic speed. Eric's body and the bodies of his dogs would get close to evaporating as the plane, no longer controlled by anyone, would crash into an uninhabited desert. A degree of visibility would then be restored to Eric (keeping him from being forgotten) – if most likely in name only, as his remains would be indistinguishable from those of the dogs and the plane, and would, in time, become indistinguishable from the desert sand.[1] Any remaining visibility as part of the

1 I am grateful to Gero Guttzeit for pointing out how much this reads like a contemporary billionaire version of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818).

artwork would be an exclusive visibility to only a few, accompanied by an evasion of governmental scrutiny through the tax-exempt status. This privately held, socially inaccessible work of art joins the white limousines (parked in an underground garage when they are not in use) and, outside the novel, the abovementioned underground bunkers and innumerable artworks kept in freeports to avoid customs duties (Kim 2023)[2] as muted signs of how the ultra-wealthy few and their possessions enjoy a social invisibility that marks a privatized sphere as driving “the annihilation of the private sphere” that Alice Borrego’s contribution to this special issue sees John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012) delineating in its evocation of social invisibility (2024, in this issue). Where *Capital* reveals decorporation, *Cosmopolis* reveals the incorporation making decorporation possible. Similarly, where Král points to the way Keith Hart, Jan Breman, and Aihwa Ong have exposed the “shadow classes amongst the working classes” as a crucial part of “the concealment of capital” (2024, 13, in this issue), *Cosmopolis* exposes the shadowy class that does the concealing.

4 Social Invisibility, Medium-Specificity, and Defamiliarization

Here, I want to turn to the question of medium-specificity raised by this special issue. Guttzeit asserts that literature “can make tangible dimensions of the lives of marginalized groups that would otherwise remain unseen” (2024, 5, in this issue), but is this “making tangible” indeed an exclusively literary power? To answer this question, one could compare DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis* to David Cronenberg’s 2012 film adaptation, and Lanchester’s novel to the 2015 BBC television series based on it. Although the metaphor of invisibility might be easier to mobilize in a linguistic than in a visual medium (*showing* someone not being seen without implying that they are literally invisible is more complex than describing this), meaning that medium-specificity certainly cannot be ignored, I suspect the contributions to this special issue could be paired with analyses of films and television series making similar points about social invisibility. At the same time, I am convinced that humanities approaches to fictionality and narrative and visual form, as found across different types of art and media, provide ways of thinking through social invisibility that add something valuable to empirical and ethnographic approaches in the social sciences. This is not only because fictionality is highly conducive to speculative thinking

2 Notably, Kim’s discussion of the freeport storage of artworks was prompted by references to this practice in a film (Christopher Nolan’s 2020 *Tenet*) and a television series (2023’s final season of *Succession*), marking popular culture’s ability to shine a light on what the wealthy would prefer to remain invisible and undiscussed.

(Haraway 2016), but also because narrative and visual form can defamiliarize our perception of the social world, enabling us to notice again or notice differently what has become, through sheer ubiquity (as with the white limousines in *Cosmopolis*) or as a result of a particular distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2013), unremarkable.

In “Art as Technique,” written in 1917, Viktor Shklovsky challenges the idea, propagated by Alexander Potebnya, that “the purpose of imagery is to help channel various objects and activities into groups and to clarify the unknown by means of the known” (1989 [1917], 738). This idea, which entails, in Potebnya’s words, the image being “the unchanging means of attracting what is perceived as changeable” and “far clearer and simpler than what it clarifies” (quoted in Shklovsky 1989 [1917], 738), also inhabits the notion that a metaphor like that of social invisibility should not become too elastic or too complex. As a counterpoint, Shklovsky proposes that “poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression” (1989 [1917], 739). Here, from the early twentieth century, comes another answer to the question posed by Král in this special issue: “how can narrative, as one of the key categories of literature – one that has come under criticism in the wake of postmodernism and its questioning of the relation between narratives and truth – how can this category be salvaged and play a role beyond the merely aesthetic function of literature?” (2024, 15, in this issue). Besides Rosanvallon’s notion of “narrative democracy,” cited by Král, and her own discussion of “the scopic power of literature to make the unseen visible,” Shklovsky puts poetic language’s power to create an *impression*, which has a link to visibility – the noun “impress” was used from the 1620s onwards to refer to a “badge worn by nobility or their retainers” (Harper 2023, n.pag.) – but also exceeds it: creating an impression can be done by making something visible or invisible, and also by making something (in)audible, (un)touchable, (un)tastable or (un)smellable.

An impression is made, according to Shklovsky, whenever poetic language goes against the habituation or automation that human perception, by its nature, will produce. This habituation or automation draws everything into the category of the self-evident, which, much like hypervisibility, annihilates through overexposure: “habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Shklovsky 1989 [1917], 741). Art’s role is to undo habitualization:

> art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make you feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Shklovsky 1989 [1917], 741; original emphasis)

Undoing the habitualized perception of certain people and things as socially invisible hinges less on restoring them to visibility than on making social invisibility itself newly perceptible as a prevalent, impactful process of invisibilization.

Sibylle Baumbach's discussion of the *Refugee Tales* (2016–2021) in this special issue homes in on how, in these tales, a "poetics of invisibility" that draws attention to "the 'making' of invisibility" is unfolded most acutely – most *impressively* – through their formal dimension as having proceeded from oral narratives told on communal walks, via double translation, to written narratives, and as intertextually invoking Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. There is, in the *Refugee Tales*, Baumbach emphasizes, a constant pushing against form as stable and unifying: the tales "continuously break with the narrative or poetic frameworks they are embedded in, refusing to be(come) contained by any form or media" (2024, 73, in this issue). This pushing against form, which also draws attention *to* form – making it perceptible *as* form instead of allowing it to be taken for granted – ensures that readers are slowed down and made to constantly reassess what visibility or invisibility means, for the refugees, for the well-known authors to whom they tell their tales, and for the readers themselves, who, Baumbach argues, are "call[ed] into presence" by having their "invisibility cloaks" – enabling an automated reading that evades responsibility – ripped off (2024, 76, in this issue).

As such, the *Refugee Tales* not only impress upon their readers how invisibility and visibility, including their own, are socially 'made,' but raise important questions: who gets to tell stories of social invisibility and whose stories of social invisibility have we become so habituated to that they are, in fact, devoured – read with ease and speed – dare I say, with enchantment (Felski 2008) – so that they are not really read at all? How are stories of social invisibility told and what genres are we habituated to encountering such stories in, making them appear as "known" in Shklovsky's terms? And, finally, how can literature and other art forms defamiliarize stories of social invisibility and, by implication, the concept of social invisibility itself? This special issue offers some provisional answers to these – and other – questions, but there is, fortunately, much left for the field of invisibility studies to do, also in relation to adjacent fields like those of disappearance studies and spectrality studies. Not curtailing the metaphor of invisibility by requiring it to be, in Potebnya's terms, unchangeable, clear, and simple will be key to advancing the field and retaining and renewing its critical power. As Gatti notes with regard to the metaphor of disappearance:

> it has gradually been turned into a shared obviousness, and, as such, it indeed orders the reality it denotes. But it does so conceiving it, precisely, as nonsensical. Absurdity, absence, paradox, void, senselessness, decivilization, uncertainty, impossibility, unrepresentability are certainly some of the terms that currently accompany the most accepted meanings of the phenomenon of disappearance and its corollary, the disappeared. A nondead/nonliving, an absent/present. An absurd. (2020, 42)

With the metaphor of invisibility, like that of disappearance, tending to the nonsensical – after all, what does it mean for something to be truly invisible? – it makes sense to keep running with it rather than to try to rein it in.

Research funding: This article emerged from Esther Peeren's role as PI in the project "Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World" (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 772436).

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