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Towards an activist philosophy of becoming-imperceptible in contemporary media

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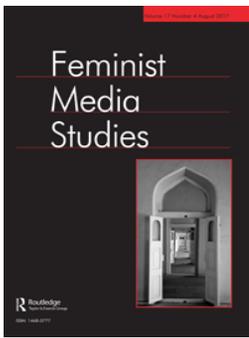
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The aesthetics of stealth: towards an activist philosophy of becoming-imperceptible in contemporary media

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that various contemporary media articulate an aesthetic of stealth, that is, the staging of acts of becoming-imperceptible. Furthermore, the article contends that the aesthetic of stealth resonates with a broader shift in the functioning of contemporary political culture, the requirements it formulates, and appropriate modes of action. The argument is presented in three case studies, each articulating one step in the argument: through Steyerl's video piece *How Not to Be Seen*, the author situates stealth aesthetics in the political context of a shift away from struggles for visibility to a withdrawal from representation and the preoccupation with becoming-imperceptible. In an engagement with the TV series *The Americans*, the author explains how exactly contemporary media, in this case television, produce an aesthetic of stealth, foregrounding the notion of ecological perception. Finally, an analysis of the changes in gameplay in the video game series *Tomb Raider* allows the author to elaborate, first, on how stealth gameplay fosters the embodied performance of ecological perception and, second, on how the media aesthetic of stealth infiltrates genres that traditionally rely on open confrontation and combat.

KEYWORDS

Stealth; aesthetics; becoming-imperceptible; ecological perception; immediation

Introduction

“To be perceived is to be defeated” (Tiqqun 2010, 214). In today's surveillance cultures, visibility and representation no longer have the same political purchase they used to be associated with. They also, if not predominantly, suggest exposure to economic as well as governmental apparatuses that have learned to capture the value of identity (Adam Morris 2012, 106–110). In response to this threat of perceptibility, many artists and activists have suggested that we should withdraw from representation.¹ “Let's disappear,” the Invisible Committee proclaims (2015, 131–167). This paper explores how these concerns are negotiated in contemporary media aesthetics, focusing on examples from video art, television, and video games. I argue that, across these various media, we can observe the articulation of an *aesthetic of stealth*, that is, the staging of acts of becoming-imperceptible as a condition for efficient political action. In this way, contemporary media affirm that perceptibility is a trap and that the more appropriate strategy under the current conditions is to stay under

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the radar. The work of stealth as a becoming-imperceptible will be theorized not so much as a matter of disappearance in the straight-forward sense of toggling from audiovisual presence to absence. Rather, stealth as a mode of becoming-imperceptible implies an engagement of the very thresholds of perceptibility in a given perceptual ecology (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari 1987, 272–290). Moreover, then, the article argues that the aesthetic of stealth helps articulate a broader shift in the functioning of political ecologies, the requirements they formulate, and the appropriate modes of action. Specifically, it will be seen that stealth is “activist” in the sense that it actively co-creates the occurrent relations of an experiential ecology; it shapes a world in constant becoming instead of assuming a pre-existing political arena in which to intervene as a stable political subject.² As case studies, I offer Hito Steyerl’s single-channel video piece *How Not to Be Seen*, a scene from the television series *The Americans* 2013–Present, and the rebooted video game series *Tomb Raider*. These very different examples have been selected for a number of reasons. On the one hand, they allow me to show how the core principles of stealth aesthetics work across different media.³ On the other hand, each example foregrounds a particular aspect of my argument: through Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen*, I will situate stealth aesthetics in the political context of a shift away from struggles for visibility to a withdrawal from representation and the preoccupation with becoming-imperceptible. Subsequently, I will engage with *The Americans* to explain how exactly contemporary media, in this case television, produce an aesthetic of stealth, foregrounding the notion of ecological perception. Finally, I will look at the recent entries in the video game series *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013 and 2015) to elaborate, first, how stealth gameplay fosters the embodied performance of ecological perception and, second, how the media aesthetic of stealth infiltrates genres that traditionally rely on open confrontation and combat, i.e., the opposite of stealth. In other words, the 2013 reboot of the famous *Tomb Raider* franchise is relevant here because it re-imagines the action hero Lara Croft in a way that resonates with the broader conceptual shift described here: Croft, notorious for her dual pistols used in open combat, goes into stealth mode.

Of imperceptibilities aesthetic and political: Hito Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen*

Hito Steyerl’s single-screen video *How Not to Be Seen* (2013) asks us to re-think the contemporary relation between politics, media, and perception. Arguing that perception is inseparably entangled with technology, the piece offers a loose series of five “fucking didactic educational” lessons for disappearing in contemporary media culture. Becoming invisible, for Steyerl, is very much a matter of becoming invisible to cameras or, more specifically, digital imaging technologies.

In Lesson 1, entitled “How to Make Something Invisible for a Camera,” the video examines resolution targets, that is, the usually black-and-white pattern sheets that allow optical devices of all kinds to be calibrated and to determine their maximum resolution. Steyerl more specifically addresses resolution targets placed in deserts and other landscapes, which are used in aerial photography and reconnaissance. As the image shows a series of test patterns, a computer-generated male voice-over explains that “resolution determines visibility. Whatever is not captured by resolution is invisible.” The didactic takeaway is that “to become invisible one has to become smaller or equal to one pixel.” This fact is, of course, already exploited in contemporary drone warfare which equips the most advanced stealth aircrafts with missiles that burrow through buildings before detonating and leave surface

impact holes too small to be detected by standard satellites (Eyal Weizman 2015). “War is invisible,” the computerized voice-over in Steyerl’s video concludes. In this style of an educational video, *How Not to Be Seen* demonstrates that the representational prowess of digital media leads to a pronounced management of visibilities and an increasing preoccupation with invisibility. While the video suggests numerous tongue-in-cheek ways of becoming invisible to media (including “being female and over fifty”), its own techniques of producing invisibility largely rely on an equally humorous use of green screen compositing. In Lesson 3, “How to Become Invisible by Becoming a Picture,” Steyerl stands in front of a green screen onto which a series of resolution targets and color test cards are projected. She then begins to apply green “camouflage paint” to her face so that her painted face itself becomes the projection surface (see Figures 1 and 2). The shots are accompanied by high-pitched synthesizer music of twinkling electronic bleeps, adding to the humor of the scene by means of a retro sci-fi ambiance. (Here, as opposed to the later example of stealth video games, the audio track does not contribute to Steyerl’s becoming-imperceptible.)

The effect created is one of holey-ness: instead of seeing Steyerl’s skin as the projection surface, we seem to be looking *through* her at the background. Steyerl’s face and body vanish optically. The electronic voice-over educator presents this kind of “camouflage” as one way of “becoming a picture.” Steyerl is no longer pictured or represented, she is the material support for the picture or, as the video itself suggests, “she becomes a picture.” In other words, she makes her own physicality work *with* the materialities and techniques of the medium in order to disappear (albeit only partially and somewhat comically). By Steyerl’s own explanation, a skillful activation of this lived relation with media can allow the body to become itself a medium of transmission, rather than a transmitted content.

This activation of the body complicates discourses of datafication in fields such as surveillance studies. These discourses tend to foreground how we are tracked and stored as data doubles, immaterial copies of ourselves produced and exploited by public and private interests. Consider as an example the collaboration between surveillance scholar David Lyon and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in which they theorize what they call *liquid surveillance* (Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon 2013). The authors suggest that, in its current and post-panoptic state, surveillance is highly dynamic. It is no longer centralized and asymmetrical as in the disciplinary society, where it served the purposes of segmenting space and



Figure 1. Still from Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File*, single-screen video, 2013. Images CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Images courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.



Figure 2. Still from Hito Steyerl, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV File*, single-screen video, 2013. Images CC 4.0 Hito Steyerl. Images courtesy of the Artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York.

fixing individuals in a distribution of discrete, functional spaces. Rather, as surveillance “liquefies,” it seeps into every aspect of society. Social media bathe us in a huge puddle of liquid surveillance, in which we offer ourselves up for investigation and stalk others. In its fluid form, surveillance has become desirable; it allows for self-promotion and entertainment. Along the way, our lives get mapped through processes of data mining which remain themselves imperceptible. Ultimately, Bauman and Lyon argue, this datafication concerns the body: “More and more, bodies are, in an ugly but apt word, ‘informatized.’ In numerous surveillance situations, bodies are reduced to data, perhaps most obviously through the use of biometrics at borders” (2013, 134). Surely, the authors mean that our bodies are controlled through the data that have been extracted from them and subsequently analyzed by various stakeholders. However, this rhetoric of datafication or informatization shifts attention away from the materiality of the body, assuming that it is “reduced” to bits and bytes. As a consequence, this intellectual avenue leads to a relative neglect of the role that our lived materiality plays in the ways we respond to surveillance. In contrast, Steyerl’s *How Not to Be Seen* shows that, far from reducing the body to data, representational technologies require us to put questions of the body center-stage. The piece foregrounds in didactic fashion that one of the key concerns in contexts of surveillance is the individual’s visibility *in relation to* the perceptual capacities of (digital) media (Anna Munster 2006). In comically educational fashion, the video proposes that perceptions are always co-produced by the various components of a perceptual ecology. This also means that, in order to become imperceptible, one must first of all perceive the *affordances* for imperceptibility that a perceptual field holds. The aesthetic of stealth concerns the perception of such affordances defined as the relational potential offered by an environment for, in this case, acts of hiding and staying out of sight.⁴ The video’s advice that “to become invisible [to a camera] one has to become smaller or equal to one pixel” engages a relational potential inasmuch as it requires the consideration of a camera’s distance and resolution in relation to the size of one’s body. The aesthetic of stealth therefore involves the perception of perception: one must perceive the very thresholds of perceptibility in a given environment. This implies that becoming-imperceptible is

not merely a matter of absencing oneself but of playing with and around the limit between the perceptible and the imperceptible.

Although Steyerl's performance of disappearance in *How Not to Be Seen* is at times amusing, the political implications of Steyerl's video essay are not, as the example of undetectable drone missiles already indicates. In fact, the argument for the necessity of invisibility in the contemporary context of surveillance culture strikes at the core of predominant Western discourses of democracy and activism. Such discourses conventionally imagine the political sphere as one in which citizens of the state or their representatives communicate rationally and deliberate on their various agendas with the aim of arriving at a viable consensus. This understanding relies on a number of concepts that have shaped modern political thought: citizens *appear* as *subjects* with certain rights and duties; they are *represented* by their members of parliament who are *accountable* to the electorate; politics fundamentally relies on the human faculty of *reason*.⁵

However, this understanding quickly reaches its limits in practice. If the parliament is a *locus classicus* of accountable rational deliberation, we must admit that today much of politics has gone para- or extra-parliamentary. Consider the Authorization for Use of Military Force law of 2001, which allows the US President to make use of "necessary and appropriate force" against enemies without congressional approval ("Joint Resolution ..." 2001). It was recently invoked by President Obama to authorize (arguably illegal) airstrikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq (see Krishnadev Calamur 2014). In practice, then, warfare is not always a matter of parliamentary deliberation. Failing the legitimation of a house majority, such endeavors nonetheless receive the approval of a public that is guided in its judgments by an arational politics of fear (Brian Massumi 2015b, 171–187). The political, then, is not strictly the domain of reason. Activist movements of recent years have also contested the viability of strategies that focus on creating visibility and affirming one's identity. Consider as an example the various incarnations of the Occupy Movement across the globe, many of which actively resisted the injunction leveled at them by public officials to "voice their demands." Or think of the activist network Anonymous, which announced its own clandestine cyberwar against the perpetrators of the Paris attacks on November 13, 2015, uncomfortably introducing itself as a third front between ISIS and Western governments.⁶ Collectives such as Tiquun and the Invisible Committee provide the manifestoes and theory for these retreats from conventional democratic practice. "The new mantra is: we have no demands. We don't want political representation. We don't want collective bargaining. We don't want a seat at the table" (Alexander R. Galloway 2011, 244). The mode of political action that gains traction across the political spectrum is one that challenges the conceptual lineage of reason–subject–identity–representation–accountability which grounds many discourses of democracy and activism (John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse 2002). At the same time, it challenges the widespread assumption, already questioned by Peggy Phelan more than two decades ago, that "greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power" (1993, 2). In fact, visibility and representation may well be a trap (Morris 2012, 106–110). As Hito Steyerl herself notes,

people have started to actively, and passively, refuse constantly being monitored, recorded, identified, photographed, scanned, and taped. Within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation—which was seen as a prerogative and a political privilege for a long time—feels more like a threat. (2012, 166)

Thus, artworks that use strategies of disappearance and stealth break with the very terms that discourses of identity and visibility politics rely on (Laura Levin 2014, 17–25).

This shift from an affirmation of representation to a withdrawal from it results in a different aesthetic treatment of individuals, especially in politically relevant situations. The following section argues that this changed aesthetic treatment consists in a foregrounding of perceptual ecologies.

Perceptual ecologies: *The Americans*

The television series *The Americans* tells the life of a married couple of Russian spies living in the suburbs of Washington, DC, in the 1980s. Created by former CIA agent Joe Weisberg, the series is partly inspired by his own experience and partly by the arrest of ten Russian sleeper agents in the United States in 2010 (Scott Shane and Charlie Savage 2010). The focus on the Cold War era is noteworthy in itself. Together with films like *Tinker Taylor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011), *Bridge of Spies* (Steven Spielberg, 2015), and many others, *The Americans* is part of a more general return of the spy genre. Evidently, the period of the Cold War remains a source for contemporary media production and artistic creation, recasting the past into the conceptual and operational molds of the present.

The series takes the Cold War into the suburb, that is, into the paradigmatically middle-class residential area of private citizens: the civil domain itself has become the arena for the exercise of soft power. The suburb itself becomes the battlefield in which the “American way of life”—with its emphasis on individualism and consumerism—is the strongest weapon at the disposal of the US. Simultaneously, however, the suburb constitutes a threat to the mission of the spies as it lures the “enemy within” into abandoning their mission. Philip Jennings (Matthew Rhys), who plays the husband to his fellow spy Elizabeth (Keri Russell), is the most susceptible to the temptations of the West and repeatedly suggests defection. The lure is not that of an “ideology,” which the Jennings have learned to despise, but the lived experience of everyday habits. Here, the conflict of the Cold War does not play out through official acts of diplomacy or even a dramatic stand-off between opposing forces in open confrontation, but in the multiple affective tensions and contradictions within the individual. Perhaps, then, it is more appropriate to speak of the contemporary spy as a *dividual*, a subjectivity internally divided between conscious thought, pre-conscious affects, non-conscious tastes and preferences, trust and doubt, etc. (Gilles Deleuze 1995; Brian Massumi 2015a, 8–36). In this way, the contemporary spy articulates concerns that are very different from those of previous decades. During the Cold War era, the TV spy “is an ‘agent’ in the fullest sense of the word—self-possessed, resourceful, independent, ‘a man in control of himself, capable of taking action, an old-fashioned freeman’” (Michael Kackman 2005, xvii). Inasmuch as he acts intentionally and dutifully in an environment that serves him as resource, the secret agent is conceptually aligned with the modern political subject outlined above. In other words, he—for the spy at this point tends to be male—performs the “ideal citizen-subject” of the post-war era (xviii). The spy of earlier decades lives a double life, much like contemporary secret agents. But, in distinction to his present-day successors, he knows how to maintain a clear division between his professional occupation and the private sphere, if only because a private life is rarely shown or downright non-existent. For this reason, the very separation between the private and the public rarely appears as problematic during the Cold War era. However, this negotiation between the public and the private, between

appearance and reality, is the main concern for the Jennings. They are caught in a web of appearances, in which they must seem unsuspecting to their surroundings, dedicated to “the cause” (despite their faltering loyalty), reliable to their informants (who have their own agenda)—and all this within a set of unforeseeable, contingent circumstances. As a result, their efficiency increasingly depends on immediate modulations of a complex perceptual ecology, on the just-in-time management of their own perceptibility. Within the story, then, *The Americans* no longer presents the Cold War as a domain of the self-determined, male agent and requires different modes of perception and action.

The Americans also poses this narrative concern as an aesthetic problem. The series premiere opens on a scene of perception in action, which shows that political action is removed from the earlier commitment to rational engagement and, instead, plays out in the immediacy of sensory perception.⁷ In other words, the aesthetic of stealth weaponizes perception itself. The Jennings and their colleague Rob (Chase Coleman) are tasked to capture a defector. While the two men wait for their target behind the corner of a building, Elizabeth positions herself inside on the first floor of an apartment building facing her colleagues’ hiding spot. In this way, they can communicate their target’s position to each other without being detected; they can get a “visual” of their approaching target without being viewed. The scene goes to some lengths to convey this sense of invisibility aesthetically. As the spies establish a line of sight between their positions, we barely catch a glimpse of them through half-opened doors and behind window curtains. Darkness and smoke further wrap them in relative opacity. Many close-ups cut each frame off from the wider surroundings. Darkness, mist, angles, blocked views, and close-ups are the visual techniques used here to make the viewer sense the furtiveness in the spies’ operation. We perceive a concerted effort to be imperceptible. This mediated duplicity—imperceptibility made perceptible—is at the heart of the aesthetic problem that this scene poses. Who is imperceptible here? And for whom?

The described sequence does not allow for a seamless pro-filmic space to emerge, given that many shots frame their content in close-up or partially hidden behind (out-of-focus) obstructions. And, yet, as the sequence multiplies and refracts points of view and the relations between them, relational cues such as sightlines, head angles, lighting and shade, etc. impel the viewer to consolidate a full sense of the environment despite the lack of a homogeneous representational space. In this way, the series performs an ecological approach to visual perception as described by James J. Gibson. Moving images can do this precisely because they are in motion (James J. Gibson 2015, 280). One of the achievements of Gibson’s theory is to take into account the fact that the perceiving individual is in movement and therefore perceives the changing relations between surfaces in relation to her own displacement.⁸ As a result, the individual gets a perception of her surroundings as a relational field as a whole *before* this perception is cognitively assessed. So when we register and maneuver the ecological complexity of our surroundings, this is not a “conceptual” or cognitive achievement but one that is directly accomplished by perception.⁹ This is relevant to the present argument for two related reasons. First, the aesthetic of stealth relies heavily on various kinds of movement. It is, in other words, perception in action. Second, the above account implies that the actionability and actions of the individual are grounded in perception as an autonomous psychophysiological process. In other words, the aesthetic of stealth mobilizes what Massumi calls “action-perception” (2015b, 98 *passim*). Action-perception is a mode of perceptual awareness that registers the stirrings of potential futures within the complex event ecology of the present. It is a pre- or non-conscious mode of relating to and, ultimately,

acting in one's surroundings. Such a mode of action, which disconnects action from ratiocination and re-grounds it in perception and affect, is increasingly required by the geopolitical conflicts of recent history which are characterized by an unsettling asymmetry between the visibility and exposure of (Western) state actors on the one hand and, on the other, the diffuse threat of terrorism.¹⁰ The aesthetic of stealth articulates this problem for a broader audience: is it possible to rationally deliberate on a strategy to fight an enemy if you do not know the enemy's position, manpower, or equipment? It isn't and therefore, Massumi shows, recent military policy texts on "network-centric warfare" address this problem by transferring decision-making from strategic and rational instances of command to the event ecology of the network itself:

This epistemological incompleteness theorem [i.e., the irreducible unknowability of the enemy] at the basis of network-centric war is an expression of an ontological condition: the "real time" of war is now the formative infra-instant of suspended perception. What are normally taken to be cognitive functions must telescope into that non-conscious interval. What would otherwise be cognition must zoom into the "blink" between consciously registered perceptions—and in the same movement zoom instantly out into a new form of awareness [...]. (Massumi 2015b, 97)

This new form of networked or ecological awareness¹¹ of one's implication in an event ecology is thus highly political and underlies the aesthetic of stealth. These remarks finally return us to the questions raised with respect to the opening scene from *The Americans*: who is imperceptible here? And for whom? Which of the characters manages to vanish within the perceptual ecology that the scene establishes and to register its potential futures? The audiovisual evidence suggests that it is in fact the target that manages to drown into the noise of the network of observation and perceives the imperceptible. Here, sound and more specifically the tension between the audible and the inaudible contributes to the target's imperceptibility.

Once the Jennings and their collaborator are in position, they stay put and wait for the target to get closer. As the target approaches the spies, unseen by him, the musical score first gains in volume and dramatic force, building toward the imminent encounter of the adversaries. However, just before walking into the trap, the target stops short—and with him the score. In this moment of silence, the viewer hears the target's hesitation and interruption in the operation's chain of events carefully laid out by the Jennings. Moreover, she listens for aural signs that might betray the secret agents' presence. Nothing. We don't see the target seeing his pursuers, we can't hear any giveaway sounds. And yet, despite their best efforts at becoming-imperceptible, the target senses the presence of the spies and flees. How did he do it? This is indeed the aesthetic problem of the scene. What stands out from the viewer's perspective is, on the one hand, the pronounced visibility of the Russian spy trio. Even though they hide from their target, they are audiovisually exposed for the viewer who can perfectly map their positions within the perceptual ecology. The animated musical score contributes to the audiovisual saturation of this scene so that what disappears, for the viewer, in the process of asymmetrical overstimulation is the target itself. This is valid for the beginning of the sequence, where the target moves in the distance and through shadows, and for the end of the scene, where we can clearly perceive him but not what or how he perceives. Even careful reexamination of the scene does not provide certainty as to how the target knew. It appears that he has a direct awareness of his surroundings that is irreducible to conscious, propositional knowledge. His knowing was non-reflective and directly perceptual, too immediate to even register in sound or images: an affective

encounter in the non-conscious blink of attention. The other remarkable characteristic of the scene, then, is the hypersensitivity of the target that goes beyond sensuous perception. By way of this duplicity, the scene comes to an aesthetic of stealth as it activates the threshold of the perceptible from both sides, making a practice of hiding pass into visibility and rendering an action-perception indiscernible, at least in terms of its sensory causation. This chiasmic play around the threshold is at the heart of the aesthetic of stealth. Stealth, when experienced through media, is a dance around the threshold of the imperceptible because media themselves have to render the becoming-imperceptible of stealth in the sensory modes of sight and sound. The aesthetic of stealth has to make the viewer see the invisible and hear the inaudible. In the present case, television has to develop techniques such as the ones mentioned above (lighting, varying transparencies, angles, blocked views, and close-ups) that make us see a relational staying out of sight. The acoustic noise drowns out information relevant to explaining the chain of events. In other words, stealth implies the holding of a contrast: the perceptible and the imperceptible are articulated through one another and, in this way, co-exist in the closest experiential proximity. Stealth forces perception to jitter on the threshold of the perceptible. It should be remembered that this threshold is always fielded in a given perceptual ecology. This means that it is relational and dynamic. The affordances for staying out of sight and out of earshot change depending on, for instance, weather conditions. Fog can envelop a body. Rain can muffle the sound of footsteps. The openings for becoming-imperceptible constantly change. As a result, it is more accurate to speak of stealth aesthetics as a continuous *thresholding* within a perceptual ecology.

Perceptual training and suspense: *Tomb Raider*

So far, I have argued that the aesthetic of stealth relates to a shift towards secrecy and imperceptibility in contemporary political culture. Looking more closely at the principles of stealth aesthetics, I have moreover suggested that stealth requires an ecological awareness of the variable affordances for becoming-imperceptible in a given setting. I would now like to turn to video games to show how stealth as a play style requires the player to perform the above-mentioned thresholding within a changing perceptual ecology. In other words, stealth gameplay provides a training in the aesthetic principles and techniques that promise efficiency in a political culture of secrecy.

The core mechanics of stealth gameplay are simple: the player is required to accomplish a mission without being detected by “the enemy,” incarnated for instance by guards, security cameras, and watchdogs. In other words, stealth gameplay is about acting efficiently without letting anyone notice that one was even there. Open combat is to be avoided. Therefore the ideal execution of a stealth mission is indeed non-lethal, if not entirely non-violent. More recent games allow for various play styles but players are oftentimes incentivized to play stealthily through higher mission scores for rigorous stealth.¹² Lethal walkthroughs may be penalized. Finally, more recent stealth games tend to give the player a “third-person” view of a 3D game space, which means that the image shows an avatar from behind which the player moves through a game space animated in three dimensions; the camera follows the avatar as she moves (Michael Nitsche 2008, 93; see Figure 3). This distinguishes such games both from first-person 3D games and 2D platformers.¹³ This preference of the stealth genre for the third-person 3D adventure is important because it foregrounds an individual in relation to his or her surroundings.¹⁴



Figure 3. Still from *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015). Lara Croft sneaks past enemies after luring them away by throwing an object.

Note: See this demo walkthrough of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* for an example of stealthy gameplay: <https://vimeo.com/206408679>

I would like to offer the recent entries in the well-known *Tomb Raider* action-adventure series as examples of stealth gameplay. This choice may seem odd because the *Tomb Raider* games are *not* strictly speaking stealth games; they are better known for the perspicuous appearance of the “homicidal archeologist” Lara Croft wielding dual pistols to be forcefully used against anyone or anything standing in her way (Diane Carr 2002, 171). Indeed, the early *Tomb Raider* games are full-blown action-adventures that favor open combat in combination with exploration and the environmental puzzles of the tombs. Here, action is always perceptible. However, the 2013 reboot of the series is interesting because it integrates stealth mechanics into an action game. The game still includes the familiar elements of exploration, puzzle, and combat, but the latter component foregrounds hiding, sneaking, and evasion in ways that its predecessors did not. In other words, the gameplay mechanics of *Tomb Raider* have undergone the more general shift towards an aesthetic of stealth that I lay out here. Within the games, this change is motivated through the narrative. At the beginning of *Tomb Raider* (2013), Lara is a young archeology graduate who participates in an expedition led by a famous archeologist. Soon after the opening scene on the *Endurance*, the ship encounters a heavy storm and the entire crew, including Lara, is stranded on an island. Most of the time, Lara is separated from the other members of the crew and has to defend herself against the numerous members of a violent occult sect who inhabit the island (Esther MacCallum-Stewart 2014). In this context, stealth is the only option for a hopelessly outnumbered Lara whose lack of survival experience and equipment contributes to making open combat initially impossible. This is very different from Lara Croft’s first appearance in the opening scene of the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) in which she impressively annihilates a pack of wolves with her dual pistols. The new Lara needs to learn how to survive from scratch. In terms of combat gameplay, the most noteworthy modification is that Lara’s first and arguably primary weapon in both *Tomb Raider* (2013) and its sequel *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015) is a bow. This choice to include bow and arrow as a weapon also speaks to a more general trend in

recent action-adventure video games.¹⁵ The reason for this is precisely that, in comparison to firearms, a bow is a silent weapon and allows for stealth takedowns at a distance. (Another, *narrative* motivation for the introduction of bows into gameplay is that they can be *low-tech* and thus provide a stealth weapon in settings where sound suppressors for firearms are hard to come by, for instance in the popular post-apocalyptic world of games like *The Last of Us*.) The consequences for the gameplay are significant. First, the player's avatar does not run through the gamespace guns blazing. She sneaks into it and analyzes her surroundings from behind cover. Once she has established the position of her enemies and the relations between them (such as sightlines and earshot), she can take them out silently and strategically, ideally without the enemies knowing that their ranks are being decimated. Further options in *Tomb Raider* of stealthily manipulating the gamespace include shooting arrows at walls to create a sound that lures enemy towards them and shooting out light sources. Instead of using force on force in an open confrontation, the player modulates her surroundings to create affordances for safe movement and/or imperceptibility. Second, stealth mechanics introduce a singular kind of suspense into the gaming experience that has to do with the necessity to act at the threshold of the perceptible. This suspense arises from the embodied knowing that to act comes at the risk of stepping over the threshold and exposing oneself whereas staying put behind cover indefinitely would amount to remaining utterly passive. It is obviously linked to the question: will things work out? Will I make it? But this "making it" also depends on "making nothing happen." Whereas the old *Tomb Raider* games always made action and perceptibility go together, the rebooted Lara Croft has to articulate action and imperceptibility. As this tension characterizes the gameplay mechanics, the *experience* of stealth is qualified by the holding of that tension or contrast as a vibrant, affective intensity. The impression of not-being-perceived slowly intensifies into a feeling of not-being that approaches an experience of desubjectivation. Put differently, the movement through and modulation of a perceptual ecology is first of all experienced as a relational becoming.

This kind of gameplay constitutes a training in the aesthetic principles of stealth to the extent that is about the dynamic mapping of the affordances for imperceptibility in a complex environment involving feedback loops and responsive action.¹⁶ This requires a lot of waiting and analyzing the environment and, once action ensues, a lot of trial and error or, differently put, learning through repetition. By way of this training, the player learns how different behaviors lead to different responses from the environment (Scott Beattie 2007). This training is in part analytical and cognitive. The player comes to *know* the game space better, *recognize* its peculiarities, *analyze* different enemy types, and assign different strategies for takedown, etc. But the repetitiveness of gameplay serves first and foremost a *perceptual training* and the honing of *skills*, including the basic proprioceptive task of learning which buttons and sticks on the controller fulfill which functions; the related capacity to perform various qualities of movement that stealth requires and, if applicable, be aware of the level of noise they produce within the gamespace (run, walk, crouch, crawl, etc.); the visual ability to analyze a game environment and parse it into, for instance, hiding spots and dangerous elements but also extract enemy sightlines (lighting, textures, contrasts, angles); the ability to map the environment through sound and index them to a threat level (enemy footsteps); and the capacity to match the various gadgets and weapons at one's disposal with the requirements of a particular situation. These are perceptual skills (rather than

cognitive ones) because they involve the direct perception of affordances in the game environment as well as the creative adaptation to those affordances.

None of these psychophysiological processes are necessarily conscious or reflective.¹⁷ In fact, understanding a challenging situation reflectively only gets the gamer so far in accomplishing the mission. Think of a situation where, playing a game, you *knew exactly* what you needed to do and failed over and over again. You start blaming the controller and/or the programmers for releasing a “broken game” when, in fact, the problem is that your perceptual system of eye–ear–hand was not quick or agile enough. Or you thought that an old trick would do the job when, in fact, you needed to adapt to changed circumstances. Ultimately, mastering these skills may lead to what is called “emergent gameplay” by which is meant the unintentional use of abilities and skills that the gameplay provides in order to create effects that programmers did not plan for. Emergent gameplay requires the ability to actively modulate the occurrent perceptual relations of the gamespace into unforeseen novelty. Skill is habit opened up towards creativity. Stealth mobilizes these gameplay skills to maximize the avatar’s actionability within the perceptual ecology of the gamespace while remaining just under and around the threshold of the perceptible.

The present account considers perceptual habits and skills (acquired in this case from gameplay) politically relevant. This is not because they form or determine players’ behavior as deterministic media effects theories might hold, but because they condition the perceptual field within which specific perceptions and behaviors emerge, thus “activating tendencies in an open situation of encounter”; in other words, media “prime” us for a certain non-consciously enacted politics (Massumi 2015a, 29). If, as some research concludes, about 40 percent of our daily behavior is habitual, then a shift in our political non-conscious towards different habits and skills—those of stealth, for instance—seems particularly relevant (Wendy Wood, Jeffrey Quinn, and Deborah Kashy 2002). The experience of this shift towards stealth is an instance of what Mary Flanagan calls “critical play,” that is, the exploration of cultural, social, and political concerns through the immediacy of gameplay (2009, 6).

Returning to *Tomb Raider* in light of these remarks, the new Lara Croft can also help resolve a discussion that has emerged around the body of the original Lara as either objectified or immaterial (Frans Mäyrä 2008, 107). This discussion opposes the argument that the *Tomb Raider* series reproduces a male gaze which objectifies Lara’s body (Carr 2002) to the view that the player sees through and past her avatar as simply a functional element of the interface (Espen Aarseth 2004). “I don’t even see her body,” Aarseth holds, effectively dematerializing Lara into an “invisible woman” (2004, 48; MacCallum-Stewart 2014). Both views have merit but overstate their points. What is perceived directly in the process of gameplay, before subject and object can be separated out from one another, are the affordances of the game environment. We see whether a ledge is too high for Lara to reach or whether enemies are looking in directions that allow Lara to sneak past unperceived. In other words, we first of all perceive the relations between her body and the environment. And, in stealth, we interpret these relations with the goal of efficiently working around the threshold of the perceptible. If Lara is ever invisible, then it is only in this relational sense, through a concerted effort to enter into a perceptual ecology. This means that *Tomb Raider* associates the opposition between a solitary woman and a slew of aggressive men to the opposition between imperceptibility and perceptibility as well as that between stealth and open combat. In this game, stealth appears as a feminine and even feminist mode of action. Lara is effective because she appears on her own terms and refuses to be perceived when it is to her advantage.

Through these associations, the reboot of *Tomb Raider* fosters perceptual skills that are distinct from those of the earlier titles in the series. For instance, contrast sensitivity, “one of the main limiting factors in a wide variety of visual tasks” and “one of the aspects of vision that is most easily compromised,” is effectively improved through video gaming (Renjie Li, Uri Polat, Walter Makous, and Daphne Bevelier 2009). This perceptual function is particularly relevant and activated in stealth gameplay, where affordances for disappearance must be perceived under difficult visibility conditions.¹⁸ Moreover, the perceptual habits of the game world infiltrate “real world” perception, resulting for example in the non-conscious parsing out of a space for its “climbability,” its potential cover spots, etc. (Angelica B. Ortiz de Gortari, Karin Aronsson, and Mark Griffiths 2011). Again, this is not to say that video games determine gamers’ behavior. Rather, their particular aesthetics prime users; that is, they condition the perceptual field for certain perceptual and behavioral tendencies. This holds not only for video games but for all media. The present account suggests that the development and refinement of an aesthetic of stealth conditions perception toward actionability below the threshold of the perceptible. It fosters a heightened sensitivity to affordances that allow the individual to disappear into her surroundings. As a result, the aesthetic of stealth accounts for the fundamentally asymmetric conditions of perceptibility and force that prevail in contemporary politics.

Conclusion

The aesthetic of stealth does not merely aim at representing acts of disappearance. *How Not to Be Seen*, *The Americans* and *Tomb Raider* all foreground, albeit in different ways, how contemporary media participate in perceptual ecologies to make their components perceptible or imperceptible. This ecological approach to perception is crucial to stealth aesthetics because it emphasizes that different ways of perceiving support different regimes of power. Furthermore, all of these examples develop techniques that allow for various modes of becoming-imperceptible: for Hito Steyerl to become imperceptible to cameras, for the characters of *The Americans* to be imperceptible to each other, and for the player of *Tomb Raider* to become imperceptible to Lara Croft’s enemies. Second, this is done by engaging the dynamic threshold of the perceptible (rather than focusing on disappearance in a straight-forward sense of audiovisual absence). The affordances for acting below or just around the threshold of the perceptible need to be renegotiated continuously. Finally, this dynamic thresholding is politically relevant to the extent that it activates perception for a different mode of action and trains viewers/gamers in aesthetic techniques that allow them to understand and navigate the contemporary political ecology of surveillance and secrecy. The aesthetic of stealth attunes the individual to a new functioning of power and allows her to adapt and survive in a time where “to be perceived is to be defeated” (Tiqun 2010, 214).

Notes

1. See Steyerl (2012, 160–175). Besides Hito Steyerl herself, artists who perform acts of becoming-imperceptible include Zach Blas, Lee Yong Baek, Liu Bolin, Manu Luksch, and Désirée Palmen. See Levin (2014, 142–153).
2. The term activism is understood in its philosophical alliance to notions of process, ecology, and relationality (Brian Massumi 2011, 1–6).

3. A wider corpus of the aesthetics of stealth would include films like *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (Tomas Alfredson, 2011), *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood 2015) and TV series such as *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–present), *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–present), *TURN: Washington's Spies* (AMC, 2014–present), and *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015–present).
4. For the concept of affordance, see Gibson (2015, 119–135).
5. See for instance Jürgen Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) for such an approach. For a critical assessment, see Jodi Dean (2002).
6. See <https://youtu.be/ybz59LbbACQ>, published on November 16, 2015, accessed March 1, 2017.
7. The scene described in this paragraph can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/205684126>
8. Gibson would say that she perceives invariants under transformation (e.g., ratios, proportions) in a changing optic array. See Gibson (2015, 85–103).
9. In this, Gibson departs from canonical theories of perception in a significant way. For him, visualization is “an activity of the [perceptual] system, not an appearance in the theater of consciousness” (2015, 244). Contemporary theories of perception and psychology hold on to the latter approach by treating the brain as a computer that “processes” the raw “information” supplied by the senses. On this point, see also Massumi (2015b, 257, n. 17). Note that Gibson's concept of *information* diverges accordingly. By “information,” Gibson means “structured energy that [is] *information about* environmental sources, in contrast to *information as structure* in an information theoretical sense which implies a sender and a receiver” (2015, xix).
10. This dilemma of “asymmetrical warfare” was one of the arguments for the US invasion of Iraq. In an address to the nation on March 17, 2003, George W. Bush stated: “Terrorists and terror states do not reveal [their] threats with fair notice, in formal declarations—and responding to such enemies only after they have struck first is not self-defense, it is suicide” (2003). The alternative is to pre-emptively strike first *without* knowing where exactly the enemy is (Massumi 2015b).
11. For Gibson, the term awareness does not imply consciousness (2015, 238).
12. For instance, *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (Ubisoft, 2013) has three play styles: “Ghost” (No detection, no enemies killed), “Panther” (no detection, all enemies killed), and “Assault” (open combat, all enemies killed).
13. However, there are important exceptions of stealth games that are in first-person, such as *Thief* (Square Enix, 2014) and the *Dishonored* series (Bethesda, 2012), or that are 2D platformers, such as *Mark of the Ninja* (Klei, 2012) and the *Stealth Inc.* series (Curve 2011–present). For the sake of brevity and argument, the below analysis excludes these games even though, *mutatis mutandis*, the argument applies to them partially.
14. This preference is evidenced in the *Metal Gear Solid* series since *Snake Eater* (Konami, 2004) as well as the *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft, 2002–present), *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007–present), and *Hitman* series (Eidos Interactive/Square Enix, 2000–present).
15. Examples of this “bowification” of video games include *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft, 2012) and *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *Thief* (Square Enix, 2014) (see Kirk Hamilton 2013). In other games such as *Dishonored* and *Dishonored 2*, crossbows fulfill similar gameplay functions.
16. The complexity of the perceptual environment depends considerably on the level of the game's AI or artificial intelligence. Enemy behavior can be quite predictable.
17. See Massumi (2015b, 120–121): “A skill is acquired and becomes habitual in the sense that the more practiced it is, the more automatic and unreflective its exercise. You have not mastered a skill until you can perform it without consciously reflecting upon how you do it as you do it. A skill, however, is more flexible than the average habit. Part of what is learned is how to adapt the performance that the skill holds in potential to differences in circumstance. You have truly mastered a skill when you can perform it adaptively without consciously reflecting upon the adaptation. The adaptations are made in real time as if they had been thought out, when they are directly acted out instead. A ‘thinking’ occurs that is one with the execution of action. Skill is what thought would be were it only in action.”
18. As an example, consider the section of the “Lakeside Resort” chapter in *The Last of Us*, in which Ellie must evade her enemies in a dense snowstorm.

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