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Anonymity/Stealth

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The Nomos of Images

Manifestation and Iconology of Law

Anonymity / Stealth

Toni Pape

On October 2011 the American cable channel *Showtime* aired an episode of its award-winning series *Homeland*, in which the protagonist Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) visits a Syrian refugee camp near the Lebanese border. The CIA agent Mathison and her colleagues move through a filmset in which the adjacent walls are covered with several graffiti that read “Homeland is racist” and “Home is a joke and it didn’t make us laugh” among many other prank Arabic graffiti (fig. 1). The series had been ‘hacked’ by the ‘Arabian Street Artists’ Heba Amin, Caram Kapp and Don Karl a.k.a. Stone during the shooting of the series four months earlier. The artist’s point was not only to communicate a profound disagreement with *Homeland*’s islamophobic depiction of the Middle East, a message that had already been stated by numerous commentators. It was to furtively insert the graffiti into the series itself so that *Homeland* would *perform* its ignorance of the subject-matter it claims to treat realistically.

Fig. 1



This intervention belongs to a wide range of recent resistance practices that harness imperceptibility and anonymity as a political strategy. Activist groups like Anonymous or the Invisible Committee, which carry this commitment to opacity in their name, are two of the most prominent examples. "To be perceived is to be defeated," the neo-situationist collective Tiqqun writes. Following this proposition, the contemporary move towards anonymity and stealth can be understood as a resistance to the pervasive surveillance of individuals and entire populations by state actants. If, as Michel Foucault has proposed, "visibility is a trap" because it allows for the increased individualisation (read also: subjectivation) of people, then imperceptibility and de-subjectivation provide a viable counter-strategy. These aesthetics of resistance also challenge earlier theories and practices of identity-based resistance. According to previous models of the various rights movements of the 20th century, the way towards political recognition for minorities passes through a struggle for visibility. Minorities would have to make sure that the powers that be could no longer overlook and ignore them. More recent political activism has moved away from this rationale.

Although these aesthetics of resistance manifest in many different ways, from small interventions into urban space to large organized demonstrations, a number of shared characteristics can be pointed out. First, resistance as "stealth" disconnects the political act from a clearly defined subject position. The identifiable political subject either dissolves into a leaderless anonymous mass, as in the *Million Mask March* organized by Anonymous, or never appears at all. In the latter case, the act stands alone, free of an artist or activist to claim it as his or her own. This contributes to the joyful suspense of stealthy interventions. Because anybody might have proposed it, the furtive intervention diffuses the potential for a minor act of resistance into the milieu: resistance (and art) can bubble up anywhere. Second, anonymous or furtive resistance oftentimes acts through sabotage and hacking, as is evident in the above example of the *Homeland* hack. Instead of voicing her opposition following the good old protocols of deliberative political communication, the artist-activist *infiltrates* the opponent. (This refusal to participate in conventional democratic deliberation constitutes a resonance with other resistance movements by way of a shared distrust of representational politics, as manifest in the *Occupy* movement.) Third, stealth is about hiding in plain sight and thus always works at the threshold between the perceptible and the imperceptible. This becomes clear in the *Homeland* hack which needed to be *imperceptible* to the show's producers in order to *be seen* on television. (One might object that the street artists very much identified themselves and declared their intentions retrospectively. The act of resistance itself, however, relied in its aesthetics on concealment and secrecy.) Thus the stealthy artist-activist must manage the various affordances for the appearance and disappearance of her resistance. As the example of artist Chris Lloyd's performance as a fake candidate for the Conservative Party in Canada further suggests, the stealthy artist-activist must become a *double agent* or a *third party* altogether. How do we make sense of a political landscape in which Anonymous, vilified by Western governments, declares its own war on the terrorist organization ISIS? Third parties outdo the simplicity of bipartisan politics we have become used to. Finally, stealth moves at various speeds and slownesses. The *Homeland* hackers waited months for their political act to bear fruit (or not). Furtive resistance always involves the risks of going unnoticed and of being thwarted before it is noticed. Depending on the situation, stealth is swift or patient.

In these ways, the use of anonymity and stealth in activist interventions introduces an asymmetry into power relations. Stealthy activists refuse to operate according to foundational values and terms of political deliberation. As a result, they slip through the meshes of the normative net that they challenge. This leads more and more often to attempts made by authorities to criminalize the values that activists affirm, something that is evident for instance in the increasing number and intensified enforcement of anti-mask laws.

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Toni Pape is Assistant Professor at the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the aesthetics of contemporary television and participatory media cultures. He earned his Ph.D. in 2014 from the Department of Comparative Literature at Université de Montréal, with a thesis entitled „Figures of Time: Preemptive Narratives in Recent Television Series. Toni's current research project, entitled „The Aesthetics of Stealth,“ investigates modes of disappearance in video games, television series, and contemporary art.

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