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Butterflies, Immigration, and Tactics of Invisibility

Reflections in a TV Screen

I saw a TV programme about butterflies the other day. I learned that their wing patterns, which we usually admire for their colourful and fanciful symmetries, serve a variety of functions. Not only are they strategies of deception – as camouflage patterns in order to visually merge with the background or as mimicry of larger, not quite defenceless animals, as in the case of the “predator eyes” on the wings of *Inachis io*, the common peacock butterfly. Some butterfly species also display additional series of *secret signs* on their wings, visible to their own kind but indistinguishable to most other animals. Those butterflies are namely capable of registering light waves within the ultraviolet part of the spectrum, beyond the range of human colour vision. For example, to the eyes of *Goneopteryx cleopatra*, the yellow Cleopatra butterfly, a pattern in UV colour appears on its fellow-butterflies’ wings, purveying sexual information for reproductive purposes. Similarly, flowers whose petals for us may seem one-coloured, like the *Rudbeckia hirta*, the black-eyed Susan, reveal a UV “bulls-eye” to the butterflies that feed on its nectar. Two different texts are thus simultaneously displayed on the same surface, one dominating over the other, depending on who is doing the reading.

On my TV screen, the image switched back and forth between human perception and a simulated butterfly gaze, the UV pattern on the wing alternately appearing and disappearing. Thus being brought closer to nature through technological simulations (I use the plural sense here, since *both* human and butterfly vision is electronically simulated by television), I was at the same time reminded of a general function of mass media: to distribute selective knowledge. In that sense, there is nothing particular at all about the butterfly wing – the world is constantly and selectively interpreted, simultaneously displayed and concealed, on TV.

I am informed by a news announcer that my country is now inhabited by 21% immigrants. The screen shows a crowded street in Stockholm, with “Arabs” and “Africans” walking amongst fair-skinned Swedes. Born pink, to a Swedish name, in Sweden, by Swedish parents, I find myself instantly posited within a divided world – presently in the proportion 79/21 – between “us” and (a seemingly ever increasing) “them”. As a rule, “they” are defined somewhere along a scale ranging from saviours (ambassadors of culture) to guests (labour), misfits (cannot get a job) or intruders (gang rapists), depending on the context. “We”,

however, simply are. “They” are caught up in an over-determination of ambiguous territorial identity – belonging both “here” and “there”, but actually not belonging at all. “We”, on the contrary, have just stayed put. My own pinkish birthright claim to the 79% “us” (who are, it would seem, 100% “ourselves”) appears as natural as the looks of butterflies and flowers. Statistically and statically, I recognise myself as already “me”.

But if vision equals knowledge, what knowledge is then required to make visible *another* meaning in the TV news announcement about Swedish immigration? Surprisingly little. In fact, the minimal knowledge that the concept “immigrant” is totally lacking an institutional, consensual definition, and that its meaning differs widely according to context, is sufficient to reveal levels of discrete signification beyond natural appearance. In this case, the figure 21% includes both those who now live in Sweden but were born in another country, and those who were born here but have at least one parent who was born abroad.

Already, “we” begin to dissolve. As it was, my grandfather worked as a visiting engineer in the United States for some years in the 1920’s. My father was born in Auburn in 1923. The next year, his family returned to Sweden. Had my father been alive today, he would thus have belonged to the 21% – born abroad and migrated to Sweden. Accordingly, my brother, my sister and I, myself, are also part of the 21% – born in Sweden with a father who immigrated. Furthermore, two of my nieces have a Danish mother. They are all part of the 21%. One of them is expecting a baby by a German guy. Their child will be born here, as an immigrant. If another niece of mine, whose boyfriend is Australian, also gets pregnant, their baby too will add to the 21%. Needless to say, my girlfriend, who migrated here from Poland 15 years ago, at the age of nine, belongs to the 21%. So does our daughter, born in Sweden. I could go on: my grandmother was born in Oslo...

In fact, most of my family – as it happens, descendants of a famous Swedish national wildlife painter – is included in the 21%. We thus find ourselves doubly inscribed: with a family name that resonates with a nationalised nature regularly displayed in museums and postcards, *and* with a statistical definition as immigrants, as “them”. But not only are we written into another statistical category than we perhaps would have expected: *our* share of the statistics, our numbers, so to speak, have been appropriated by a certain discourse on immigration combining them with TV images of “Arabs” and “Africans” in *crowded* Swedish streets. And that image is precisely what, paradoxically, allows my self-understanding as belonging to a 79% “us”. What different message would be conveyed if the statistics were combined with an image of an *empty* street, or with a photo of me and my father in my

childhood forest? The discourse on immigration is not “about” immigration. It constitutes immigration, discursively.

Meanwhile, butterflies flutter from flower to flower; aeroplanes fly between airports. As in the natural world, strategies of invisibility and deception are at work in the systems of human migration too. In the interiors of airport terminals, anonymous doors and corridors guide asylum seekers out of sight from other passengers. Severe fines for bringing asylum seekers without proper visa documents to the borders of Schengen countries, such as Sweden, impel travel and transport companies to set up preventive control mechanisms already in the places of departure. Thus, the execution of Swedish immigration policies is removed outside the Swedish horizon, in-visualised and transferred into the hands of commercial agents.

Within the national borders, in contrast to the above-mentioned strategies, a wide range of *tactics* of invisibility are implemented on a daily basis. Around a thousand persons are now in Sweden hiding away from expulsion; together, they equal the population of a small provincial town, but they are scattered and in concealment, dispersed and in constant flux. For them, and for those who hide them, all the small ways in which a person is seen, gets noticed, marks a space as her own, occupies the gaze of another; all those small instances of recognition, which usually confirm the person, instead threaten her existence. Risk situations and tactics of circumvention are plural. The risk of washing and drying one’s clothes in common laundries. Avoiding to buy food in the same store too often. The anxiety of travelling by train, or of going to the hairdresser; situations where one is simultaneously exposed and not free to move. Children, of course, involve particular problems: to provide education, to constantly weigh their need for friends against the danger that they may confide in friends too much. To change residence again and again, at short notice, and to always cautiously clean up after oneself.

The Swedish artist Anna Brag approaches these experiences in her video work *No man ... an Island*. Its basis is a long conversation between the artist and a woman of her own age, who for two years now has been in Sweden hiding away from expulsion to her war-ravaged native country. To document a person who is dependent on invisibility necessarily involves a careful balance between representing and concealing. Only the sound of the woman’s voice, not the image of her face, is presented to the beholder. Her image, as well as markers of any recognisable location, are withheld by an evasive camera-eye, whose blurry focus glides across seemingly neutral surfaces: kitchen cupboards, garden flowers, a Venetian blind... As the woman’s words grow into an anonymous but straightforward account of her

experiences before, during and after her migration to Sweden, the viewer must wonder whether the camera eye actually represents the woman's gaze or perhaps his own.

Of course, Brag's work requires that a trust be established between the artist and the (un)portrayed, since both must contribute to the necessary invisibility. Their encounter had to be preceded by a number of discrete inquiries to build confidence. Finally, it is only the renunciation of facial portraiture that permits these experiences to be laid bare. Conversely, for every non initiated meeting this woman face to face, she must be silenced, covered-up behind what may appear as a mask of everyday normality. Behind that mask, however, as anyone who listens to the voice in Brag's work becomes acutely aware of, is hidden no exclusive knowledge, no treasure or crime, which in itself would motivate hiding. Instead, we are told precisely the opposite – of an everyday existence, mirroring our own, lacking in any mysterious quality or essence. Indeed, if we were to speak here about two different texts – one visible (mask) and one hidden (face) – there would be no discernible difference between them. The display of mimicry and camouflage, thus, is not brought about by the existence of a secret, but by the contingencies of immigration policy, asylum criteria, and political will. Or, to put it differently, because someone doesn't *want* her to live here.

Roland Barthes once imagined that there might be, somehow, a new science for each object, a *mathesis singularis* (instead of the traditional *universalis*). Could there also be a unique statistics for each and every one of us, incomparable to everyone else's – no more "we" or "they"? Absurd as this fantasy is, ruling out categories of nationality, ethnicity, etc., it may serve as counterweight to fantasies of "us" – exclusive or inclusive. One of the discourses on immigration, that of multiculturalism, is not unlike the poetics of butterflies on flowery meadows: nomadic and exotically colourful creatures pollinate their environment, thereby enriching it with aromatic flowers – which would be, I suppose, the pizzas and chorizos. Both fantasies also include a motif of complete transformation: as the anonymous caterpillar turn into a wonderful butterfly, the immigrant *becomes* her culture first at her arrival to the new, free country. As many have pointed out, the totalitarian element in multiculturalism consists precisely in this frictionless reduction of the individual to a mere function of culture. Here, "we" are united, as in an edenic garden where all animals are allowed to live, through the supposition that "your culture is to you as my culture is to me".

What is lacking in that vision, however, is – besides that paradises tend to be heavily guarded – the inescapable discrepancy between any subject and "its" national or cultural identity. It lacks UV reception; it is blind to that *other text*, which is always written

across and against such inclusive definitions, and visible only to a secret, personal gaze, but never to bureaucracy. Brag's video work, blurry and undetermined – is the woman Kosova, Iraqi or Colombian? – brings into focus precisely that split between individual existence and discursive determination of identity, always forced upon the subject from outside. In such violent conflicts, as the one from which this woman has fled, that existential dilemma becomes acute. A PUT (as the abbreviation for permanent residence permit is spelled in Swedish) would resolve neither the dilemma, nor the conflict, but simply acknowledge the right of an Other to live and to be partly seen.

Max Liljefors