Social Camouflage: Functions, Logic, Paradoxes

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Abstract. Camouflage is usually understood as a type of deceitful communication strategy in the animal and human domains. In this piece, we invite scholars to consider how the phenomenon of camouflage, while certainly grounded in antagonism and selection, might exceed its strategic meaning. Using the case of undercover agents movies, we attempt to flesh out the inner logic of camouflage and the type of social-existential situations it gives shape to. Exploring the mundane practical problem of 'infiltration' into a social group or social milieu, the article zooms in onto the experience of camouflage and highlights its relatedness to and distinction from imitation. Camouflage is here used not as an overarching interpretive category, rather, as an instance that reveals something about the problems inherent in the constitution of inter-subjective life. The article seeks to contribute to a theoretical development in the study of social logic and social teleology, stressing the curious entanglement of deliberate strategic action and irrational desire that contradistinguishes what could be called the 'aberrant conjunction' of the *camoufleur* and its target. Camouflage, we conclude, is not only about make-believe but also, crucially, about desiring and learning to desire.

Keywords: Mimicry, Camouflage, Undercover movies, Infiltration, Social logic, Social phenomenology, Inter-Subjectivity

Introduction

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In this paper, we expand on the notion of camouflage beyond the domains in which it is most commonly tackled, namely biology and visual warfare applications[2]. We are interested in the case of social camouflage as a 'naturally artificial' phenomenon that enables us to theorise some general aspects of social life. At the core of this paper is an exploration of human social camouflage as related to yet distinct from animal camouflage – better, as we shall see, it is the functionalist gaze that has been traditionally cast on animal camouflage what we are interested in overcoming. We invite scholar to consider how the phenomenon of camouflage, while certainly grounded in antagonism and selection, exceeds its strategic meaning. Indeed, the case of undercover agents movies presents us with situations in which camouflage appears as a game played out 'at the limits of control', with unsettling consequences for the players who deployed it as a strategic tool in the first place. As we zoom in on the mundane practicalities of 'infiltration' into a social group or social milieu, we can observe how the inner logic of camouflage gives shape to peculiar social-existential situations.

The experience of camouflage, it is argued, is deeply related to imitation as a general social phenomenon, particularly as theorised in the Tardean tradition. However, the specificity and distinctness of camouflage from imitation should not be underestimated. In fact, whereas Tarde and followers stressed that imitation is a most natural phenomenon amongst humans, one which is intrinsic to the basic competences of socialisation and which develops spontaneously, camouflage initially presents us with a situation in which everything looks concocted, engineered, artificial. In respect of this, the article invites to pay attention to what happens in the moment in which an actor (the camoufleur) attempts to translate a corpus of formal knowledge ('know-that') into immediately relevant and sanctioned practical action ('know-how'). Examining the case of the undercover agent as *camoufleur* and infiltrator, it will be possible to ascertain the extent to which camouflage itself tends to produce a set of paradoxical outcomes which, we argue, are related to some essential features of social life.

The structure of the argument proceeds as follows. In the first section, we review a number of functional explanations of camouflage in the biological domain. We pay specific attention to the work of classic scholars in biology, such as Bates, Müller, Thayer and Portmann, as well as Caillois' essayistic elaboration of the motif of mimicry in insects. In parallel, we turn towards the social theory of Goffman and Garfinkel, particularly their description of interpersonal behaviour as it unfolds within the interaction order. By untangling different theoretical views on the phenomenon, we wish to highlight which dimensions and which notions could be more helpful to

develop our own theorisation of social camouflage. In the second section, we consider the logical predicaments and paradoxes generated by camouflage. It is at this point that we introduce our major research material, namely undercover movies. After detailing the interest such materials possess for us, we move forward to a discussion in social theory informed mainly by a conversation with Tarde's and Caillois' reflections on imitative processes. In the fourth section, we turn to phenomenology and hermeneutics in order to uncover further insights into the type of existential situations created by camouflage behaviour. By doing so, we add flesh to the logical diagram of camouflage encounters, arguing that the inter-subjective constitution of social camouflage cannot be reduced to logic only. In the final section, we highlight how social camouflage affects all parts involved in an exercise that is not only about make-believe, but also crucially about learning to desire. Throughout the paper, we remark the tension that exists between, on the one hand, camouflage as a strategic deployment-achievement and, on the other, camouflage as a barely controllable driving force of social life, whereby the imitative relation 'carries away' with it both the *imitans* and the *imitandum* in a number of 'aberrant movements'.

The Functions of Camouflage

> Dans la ville, et à certaines heures, pourtant, quelle tentation de passer à l'ennemi ! quelle tentation de s'identifier à ces pierres, de se confondre avec cet univers brûlant. [But in the city, at certain hours, what a temptation to shift to the enemy! What a temptation to identify oneself with these stones, to melt into this burning universe.]
> Camus, *Œuvres* II : 830

Camouflage may offer an interesting example of what Gilles Deleuze (1970) contended in his interpretation of Spinoza, namely that it is impossible to oppose the natural and the artificial as such, given that nature itself is full of artifices. Indeed, camouflage is a wholly 'naturally artificial' phenomenon, whereby animals enact vis-à-vis one another a series of semiotic deceptive strategies. Deception can be defined as the divergence which is generated in the eyes of the beholder between a given sign and its actual biological meaning. In short, camouflage concerns the domain of signs emission and reception (from this point of view, warfare applications are not different from animal predatory relations [see e.g. Goffman 1970; Forsyth 2014]). But, does camouflage also attain the domain of symbols? In other words, besides its strategic meaning in terms of biological antagonism and natural selection, does it also possess any cultural significance?

In this piece, we venture into puzzling about how a notion of camouflage suitable to describe human social relations could be envisaged and outlined. This task entails, in the first place, articulating the visual culture of camouflage. We will do so by analysing a series of undercover movies that stage prototypical camouflaging situations. Thanks to such analysis, we suggest that human social camouflage entails a peculiar extension or *prolongation* of the directly perceptual camouflage performed by

animals. Social camouflage, we argue, can be appreciated as an amplified or extended version of animal camouflage. In adopting such perspective, we follow the lineage of Gabriel Tarde's social theory, especially where the French classic author claims that specifically *social* repetitions enable an amplification of merely *physical* and *biological* repetitions. For Tarde (1890: 37-38), indeed, social repetitions appear as veritable 'generations at a distance'. The name of Tarde is also commonly associated with the idea that the social bond is defined and shaped by *imitative* behaviour. In the present discussion, we refrain form explicitly engaging the so-called mimetic controversy, concerning the allegedly imitative nature of humans. Hence, our preference for the word 'camouflage' vis-à-vis imitation and mimicry. The word camouflage contains a *theatrical* element that stresses the precisely artificial, even baroque aspect of this natural process. Whereas in Tarde imitation functions more as an *explanans* than an *explanandum* of sociability, the case of camouflage places us – at least *prima facie* – before an *artful* nature that confines with sophistry, and which calls for explanation.

In the following pages, we embark in an explicit critique of utilitarian and functionalist explanations of camouflage, focusing on the peculiar situation of the *camoufleur* (i.e., the subject performing camouflage behaviour) and the ensuing type of relation with the beholder that is thereby constituted. We argue that, in the explanation of the external appearances of living beings, functionalism is not *per se* thoroughly wrong. Rather, its shortcoming lies in providing an account of social phenomena which is partial, selective and limited. In this sense, functional analysis can be very useful for the purpose of focusing on specific aspects of social relations; on the contrary, whenever functionalism is used as a key to the totality of social life, it inherently turns into a reductionist, ultimately misleading position. Our critique of functionalism is not limited to the domain of the human and social sciences. In the field of zoology, we follow the scholarship of Adolf Portmann, a towering figure in the study of animal morphology in the 20th century (see in particular, Portmann 1990). Portmann's insights guide us to approach the domain of *form* as a layer of animal and human existence on its own account, which can never be reduced to a sum of functions. A critique of functionalism inspired by Portmann runs in two directions: on the one hand, it points out the insufficiency of basic biological functions (survival and reproduction) in accounting for the richness and multifariousness of animal shapes and colours. The functional gaze disregards the actual plurality of forms and, by failing to attend it, forces interpretation of a wide array of living phenomena into the rigid, monotonous scheme of presupposed biological functions. This way, forms can only appear as devoid of any intrinsic meaning. The problem is that meaning can never be reduced to function. Whereas *functions* establish relationships between two or more terms brought into a single equation, *meaning* constitutes a totality or wholeness that never stands in function of something else. Meaning is a totality which can only be understood in reference to itself. Ultimately, meaning is located at the level of life, as opposed to the level of survival – and, if survival is clearly necessary to life, it is precisely because survival is *in the service of* life, rather than vice versa.

In the late 19th century, the study of camouflaging strategies in the animal domain was pioneered by the painter Abbott H. Thayer and his son Gerald (Thayer 1909; Behrens 2009). Probably as a consequence of the visual interests of these authors, most subsequent scholars have focused on animal shapes, colorations and markings, thus revealing a preference for the visual register over the other registers of the animal sensorium. Yet, it is important to recall that vocal and olfactory camouflages are also widely recorded in nature (Wickler 2013). In general, contemporary scholars in the natural sciences employ the term 'camouflage' as an encompassing notion that covers different forms of concealment (Stevens and Merilaita 2011: 5). More specifically, Stevens and Merilaita enumerate two major strategies of camouflage: 1) strategies preventing *detection*, usually enacted by somehow vanishing into the environment (*crypsis*); 2) strategies preventing *recognition*, usually enacted by assuming the appearance of a different object or body, for instance an uninteresting of threatening one (*masquerade*). To these, the authors add two further strategies aimed at confusing the perception and detection of movement, namely, what they call 'motion dazzle' (colorations and markings that hamper estimates of speed and trajectory) and 'motion camouflage' (when the animal moves in a way that hampers the visibility of its very movement). Turning to crypsis, this general term includes an array of strategies whereby an animal manages to escape being perceived by either its predator or prey. These strategies include various techniques, such as background matching, counter-shading (through either deleting one's own shadow or visually flattening the animal's three-dimensional body), disruptive coloration (adopting false edges and boundaries), flicker-fusion or blur motion, distractive markings, transparency, and silvering (or hyper-reflectiveness).

It is important to remind that, at least in biology, mimicry represents an older tradition than camouflage, which dates back to at least Henry Walter Bates (1825–1892) Bates introduced the term 'mimicry' in 1862 upon return from his Amazonian fieldtrip which spanned the 1850s. A tripartite scheme was outlined, whose actors are the *mimic*, the *model*, and the *receiver*. Given his interest in butterflies, Bates mainly focused on *protective* mimicry, whereby certain innocuous butterfly species reproduce the aposematic (warning) coloration of different toxic species. Insofar as unprotected species imitate protected ones to obtain unilateral survival advantages, this situation can also be appreciated as a peculiar type of parasitism. In subsequent years, the German scholar Fritz Müller (1821–1897), an associate of Bates', reframed the issue of mimicry in terms of a co-evolutionary enterprise. Formulated in the 1870s, Müllerian mimicry is grounded in the cooperation, rather than competition, of two species. Indeed, since both parties benefit from reciprocal resemblance (for each species, the receiver's attack will be halved), the shift towards mutual resemblance is circular. Consequently, it is impossible to distinguish the model from the copy, telling who exactly is mimicking whom. From this perspective, mimicry is a matter of coevolution through the convergence of specific bodily traits.

In the 20th century, a different and for us more alluring criterion for the classification of animal mimicry was advanced by the essayist Roger Caillois (2008[1960]). In a classic

essay, he suggested that the most general phenomenon was, in fact, mimicry, while camouflage would be just *one type* of mimicry among others. Caillois then identified three principal *functions* of mimicry, which he called, respectively, masquerading, disappearing, and intimidating. Roughly, these three functions correspond to three different forms of becoming or transformations which are undertaken by the mimic. We might call them, respectively, a) *becoming-another-one*, i.e., copying an external, individual model; b) *becoming-furniture*, i.e., hiding in the environment (*assimilation au décor*, as Caillois put it); and c) *becoming-monstrous*, i.e., assuming an imposing and intimidating colour, shape, voice etc.[3] Form this perspective, camouflage corresponds roughly to a form of becoming-furniture. However, it might also share resemblances with the enactment of becoming-another-one, especially understood as a performance of 'passing'. The latter term was employed, in the social sciences, by Harold Garfinkel (1967), who famously described the strategies put in place by Agnes, a transsexual person, in order to satisfy the 'accomplishments' required by the sex Agnes had opted for. Also, turning to fine literature, 'passing to the enemy' is the expression used by Albert Camus in the epigraph to this section, where the author voices a sort of *cupio dissolvi*, a desire for dissolution which is intrinsically also a search for liberation. An earlier essay by Caillois (1938) moved along similar lines as Camus', describing mimicking animals as creatures 'tempted by the environment', afflicted by 'psychasthenia', or psychic weakness.[4]

Caillois' three-fold classification is especially interesting for us here because, despite announcing them as three animal 'functions', the author concludes his essay with arguments that emphasise the inherently more-than-functional nature of mimicry. Specifically, Caillois understands these three types of imitation as three fundamental drives that permeate animal as well as human existence. In his view, despite its apparently inescapable rational premises, the logic of mimicry systematically gives way to hyper-telic morphogenesis. In other words, the forms and shapes conjured up by mimicry are inherently luxurious and excessive vis-à-vis the original aim they are supposed to serve. Even when they seek to produce naturalistic resemblance, a tendency towards exaggeration – toward *kitsch*, if one wishes – is inevitable in mimicry. Such an insight resonates profoundly with the idea exposed above that artificiality is the truest nature of camouflage. Caillois (1938) introduces a neologism to describe the type of animal mimicry he is interested in capturing, namely, *téléplastie*, or tele-morphism. It is an idea that intriguingly resonates with Tarde's notion of imitation as 'distant generation'. As described by Caillois, mimicry is a 'tele-plastic' procedure that generates animal forms 'at a distance'. The notion of distance is very important, for the distance between the model and the mimic represents a sort of mobile 'element' or 'medium', which makes their relation always unsettled to some

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[3] Incidentally, let us remark that becoming-monstrous includes, but is not limited to, *aposematic* coloration.

[4] In his 1960 essay, the same author abjured and revised this idea, denying that visual disappearance can be correlative of a desire to die on the part of the animal.

extent. Such transferal of forms across a critical spatial (as well as temporal) distance is, as we shall see shortly, a pivotal aspect of social camouflage. There is also one additional idea in Caillois which we would like to take on board. The French author highlights the continuity between animal and human mimicry. For Caillois, at bottom, animals and humans do the same. The only difference lies in that, while animals perform their mimicry on bodily surfaces, humans tell to each other myths and tales which are incessantly crossed by stories of metamorphoses, disappearances, and imposing apparitions. For humans, mimicry cannot but pass through language, with its discursive and narrative formations – such as, prototypically, mythology.

Animal as well as human camouflage thus entails certain 'visibility games'. In social theory, besides Garfinkel, the name of Goffman stands out as the great theoretician of the micro-visibility games that contradistinguish social interaction – including, notably, staging, 'face-work', managed inattention, collusive feigning, and 'occult involvements'. In Goffman's view, most social dynamics of inter-visibility can be said to derive from the tension between the objective requirements of the interaction order and the individual's – more spontaneous or more opportunistic – deviations and distractions from such requirements. For Goffman (1961), the practical accomplishments of social interaction are made possible by a sort of cooperative amnesia of all those elements that are to remain officially excluded (invisible) in a situation. Since his Ph.D. dissertation on island communities interaction, Goffman (1953: 38) was acutely aware that the rules of interaction can be strategically manipulated:

> Given the rules of the social order, we find that individual participants develop ruses and tricks for achieving private ends that are proscribed by the rules, in such a way as not to break the rules.

What this curious formulation – tricking without breaking – alludes to is the proper working of deception and its problematic management. In Goffman's view, the quandary of social camouflage lies in the question: how is it possible to take advantage of interaction without concurrently submitting oneself to its requirements? Such a 'slantwise' approach to rules makes sense with reference to Goffman's more general concern with the fact that, in social life, there can be no ultimate distinction between reality and make-believe.[5] Goffman is a theorist of thin surfaces observed as they constitute the actual thickness and seriousness of social demands. In a subsequent and more famous expression, Goffman (1956) describes an array of 'arts of impression management' deployed during the social intercourse. In general, impression management can be attained thanks to the control of information during specific public interactional performances. For Goffman, secrets management is a specimen in impression management, as the series of evoked 'impostor' figures (also known as 'discrepant roles') attests. In particular, the figure of the 'informer' described by Goffman certainly resembles closely the situation of the camouflage infiltrator we

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[5] See also the notion of 'resistance' discussed in Brighenti (2011).

are tackling here. The dramaturgical metaphor associates the region of front stage with information deliberately 'given', as opposed to a backstage region where information is supposed to be concealed, and when insufficiently concealed, inadvertently 'given off', or leaked. It should be remarked that most of what happens with the deliberate management – as well as mismanagement – of information falls within the domain of 'strategic interaction' (Goffman 1970) and, as such, is not particularly problematic from a theoretical point of view. Yet, the analysis of impression management strategies is later continued by Goffman (1974) in the theory of interactional and conversational 'frames' as schemata of interpretation for answering the crucial cognitive question of social life, namely 'What is going on here?'. Specifically, in the lexicon of frame analysis, the social camouflage we are discussing corresponds to a case of 'fabricated framework' (as opposed to 'keyed framework'), i.e., a frame fundamentally grounded in deception and self-deception, rather than a mere modulation of an allegedly neutral reality.

In comparison with Goffman's analytical interests, our focus in the present piece lies not simply in the rules for staging certain acts of 'presentation of the self', or in the technical ruses associated with strategic information handling. In our view, such impeccable formal analysis of the geometry of interaction needs to be complemented by a consideration of the affective and existential dimensions of social camouflage. Whereas Goffman's sensitivity is permeated by an overall concern for organisation – the problem of social order or, the 'organisational premises' of the social intercourse, as he has sometimes called them – our current inquiry is set within a post-organisational theoretical horizon whose inspiration is closer to vitalist social theory. In a sense, part of Goffman's scholarship – and probably the majority of his followers' – still sides with the functionalist explanations of camouflage which, as said above, we wish to contest. In particular, in his analyses, Goffman presupposes that the 'sides' (such as team membership, audiences etc.) are an already pre-constituted entity. On the contrary, an enlarged notion of camouflage such as the one we are attempting to develop here suggests that sides themselves are always caught in a variable geometry (a topology) that morphs (not to say, perverts) them.

In summary, in this section we have introduced some key notions to be deployed as analytical tools for the analysis of our case. Beginning from the idea that human camouflage is an amplified, extended version of animal camouflage, we have remarked the tension been functionalist and 'excessivist' (or, economic and anti-economic) approaches to camouflage and its visibility games. We can now proceed to analyse the logic of camouflage in action and its consequences.

The Logic of Camouflage

> But we did get busted all the time. Cops would be standing outside your house, just waiting for you. Finally, we got pretty good at stashing our contraband – Nick would hide stuff in his saxophone. And the undercover cops never did get that hippie look right. You know, the guy would be standing there, wearing a Nehru jacket with a big green

medallion, thinking he was really hip. Then you'd look down and see plastic sandals. It was fucking terrifying, really, at times, but it certainly never stopped us.
Lemmy Kilmister, *White Line Fever*

In this section, we introduce the substantive material to be observed in depth, namely undercover agents movies, and explain why we are interested in it. It should be remarked that, by picking films as a case study, we do not intend to place our inquiry in the domain of either cultural studies or film criticism; instead, we remain in the context of social theory. In a sense, for us the undercover agent embodies the latest incarnation of the ancient Platonic figure of the *mimetes* – the mimic, the *imitans* or, in our version, the *camoufleur*. More prosaically, the infiltrator is an agent or spy who, for reasons that may range from professional duty to personal vengeance, joins *in incognito* a criminal organisation, a gang, or some other group of youngsters.[6] Undercover agents have always being fascinating, as are many other psycho-social types who are reputed to live completely artificial lives where 'normal' morality seems to be suspended.[7] Recently, for instance, the UK College of Policing has been pressured to publish ethical and operational guidelines that limit the tactics available to covert units: while undercover policing has been described as an 'essential tactic to protect the public, save lives and bring serious criminals to justice', still a strong concern with agents engaging in sexual activities and drug consumption is expressed (*The Guardian* 2016).

Well before infiltrating any actual criminal milieu, the undercover agent has certainly infiltrated narrative fiction and, via Hollywood cinema, the collective imagination. Accordingly, there are various reasons why the undercover movie genre could be helpful in the context of our discussion of camouflage. First, the genre has an archetypal resonance. As cultural theory pointed out long ago (e.g., Barthes 1972[1957]), in the 20th century cinema has ingested a number of pre-existing collective narrative motifs. With reference to the framework drawn in the previous section, cinema could thus be regarded as the contemporary anthropological equivalent of mythology. As we have just observed, Caillois likens human mimicry to animal mimicry, except for the fact that the latter appears prolonged into a different medium, which the medium of language. Myths are actually filled with the three processes of, respectively, becoming-another-one, becoming-invisible, and becoming-monstrous. Narrative cinema has inherited a good deal of such adventures in form and transformation. From this point of view, the fact that infiltration movies include several blockbuster movies as well as a good deal of B-movies cannot but represent an

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[6] There might be instances in which the infiltrator comes from the same type of culture he spies on; however, this fact is not so essential given that, in any case, spying requires a breaking away from the unreflective attitude towards one's culture. We shall return to this point below, analysing the importance of *nonchalance*, fluency and 'being at ease' in camouflage.

[7] For a notable literary rendition, one can refer for instance to Emmanuel Carrère's *L'adversaire* [*The Adversary*], reconstructing the story of Jean-Claude Romand, a French murderer and impostor who pretended to be a medical doctor for 18 years before killing his family when he was about to be exposed.

additional spur to scrutinise them as contemporary mythological products. Mythologically speaking, we cannot fail to notice that the infiltrator is, in fact, a re-enactment of the *trickster*, the famous mythic-anthropological figure of cunning and fooling. As noticed by Lévi-Strauss (1963[1958]), the trickster both embodies and exploits all the inevitable ambiguities and ambivalences that affect each cultural system. As such, the infiltrator may deserve an interest as a device that is revelatory of some tenets of social logic well beyond any specific cultural context under consideration.

The second reason to linger on undercover movies is that, as hinted above, infiltrating essentially entails an activity of 'passing' *à la* Garfinkel and of 'staging' *à la* Goffman. From this point of view, infiltration unfolds in a dimension which the social theorists of surfaces, from Simmel to Goffman, have made us sensitive to, providing us with tools for spotting and analysing its working. In undercover movies, the spectator is left to puzzle about just how the agent will manage to imitate proficiently in terms of attire, accent, attitude and so the members of the target group, whose standards he might not be familiar with. When and where will a fatal flaw on his part emerge? In the measure in which the spectator identifies with the infiltrator, the attempt may look increasingly helpless, generating thrill and anxiety – how, we keep asking ourselves, will the hero be able to perform gestures whose real meaning is not even fully grasped by her or him, gestures that might receive different connotations according to unpredictable intervening variables? The infiltrator appears constantly 'weighted' with the scales and standards of the target group. Undergoing the experience of being assessed and evaluated, and bringing us with him/her, the infiltrator is an individual who stages all the difficulties of being 'just normal'. In this sense, incidentally, it is clear that the condition of the undercover agents is also linked to the status of ethnographers and all other social researchers who decide to approach their subjects closely via various forms of 'participant observation.'[8]

The third set of reasons to study undercover movies lies at a deeper theoretical level. What does the work of infiltration exactly entail? What is the trans-local value of this specific operation? Where to locate the threshold past which the infiltrator attains that special 'bridging ground' between 'me' and 'you', between 'us' and 'them'? On the one hand, the situation of the undercover agent appears as a hyper-cognitivist one, whereby one constantly needs to be mindful about one's being on the verge of infiltrating a potentially alien 'something'. This object=x can never be observed neutrally, though, from – so to speak – God's own point of view. In this sense, for all practical purposes what really matters is not how the model *really* looks like to an external, 'objective' observer. Instead, what matters is how the *imitandum* conceives its own look and how such awareness feeds back onto his/her own sense of being-at-ease in his/her countenance. At stake is, in other words, an endogenous, rather than exogenous, mode of existence as it unfolds inside an interpersonal *Umwelt*, or

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[8] The issue regarding 'overt' versus 'covert' participant observation is widely discussed in ethnographic research, for both its methodological value and its ethical implications. See e.g. Hilbert (1980).

enveloping milieu. On the other hand, as we are going to see shortly, camouflage behaviour seems to brings with it a power that systematically transcends cognitivism. In undercover movies, what we call 'aberrant alliances' – and which Goffman (1956) would have addressed as the problem of the maintenance of 'dramaturgical loyalty' – are a most common feature. Such alliances systematically pervert strategic plans. In our view, the underlying reason for this is to be sought in a crucial tension that is inherent in social camouflage. In this essay, we wish to highlight the existence of a tension between *imitation as a strategic deployment* and *imitation as a driving force of social life*, whereby the imitative relation, as baroquely and excessively staged in camouflage behaviour, carries with it both the *imitans* and the *imitandum* into a number of 'aberrant' movements.

At first sight, camouflage infiltration certainly appears a rational strategy on the part of the police, in that it leads to collecting precious evidence to make arrests which would otherwise be impossible to obtain. In addition, what makes the structure of the game cogent is that it is a *life-or-death situation*. Just as in the basic functionalist ethological situation, what is at stake is, first of all, adaptive survival. The *camoufleur* risks his/her own life: as the story unfolds, it usually proves increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible to escape from the situation. In this type of movies, the plot is usually kept rocking by the interweaving of two distinct layers, whose visibility changes according to the perspective of the observer. The most visible layer is the deceiving one, whereas the actual meaning of actions, words and gestures lies buried in the least visible, or invisible layer. Between visibility and invisibility, it is thus possible to identify an ideally thin line, which we call the *line of deception*.[9] Here is a summary table of such structural situation:

Table 1. The structural situation of infiltration

| INVISIBILITY	VISIBILITY
Infiltration	Masquerading
Plotting	Posturing, Pretending
Moral corruption	Staged Virtue

<div align="center">^
line of deception</div>

Most interesting is, of course, not the line per se, but the *movements* that cross-cut it. Such movements are incessant. The reason is that, while logically distinct, the two layers cannot be successfully kept apart. The driving factor in undercover movies,

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[9] Brighenti (2010) has explored visibility as inherently a threshold-like phenomenon.

which makes them so compelling, is tied to the increasing number of crossings – double-triple-quadruple crossings . The multiplication of crossings leads to a situation of *generalised multiple 'passings'* across the line of deception. A zone of 'indistinction' between the opposing parts is thereby generated. In this sense, one important variant in the scheme is the case of twin deception, or deception-in-the-mirror: what happens in this case is that the line of deception crossed by one element (a->b) is simultaneously matched by an opposite counter-movement undertaken by the other element (b->a). *The Departed* (2006) by Martin Scorsese is a narratively imprecise yet powerful movie that stages one such a case of twin deception. In Boston, Captain Queenan (Martin Sheen) of the Special Investigations Unit of the State Police assigns undercover agent Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) to infiltrate the Irish Mob. However, the boss Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) (curiously, the boss has an Italian name, yet the character is inspired by the really existing Irish gangster Whitey Bulger) had already, since a long time, infiltrated one of his men, Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon), as a mole within the same Police Unit (Colin has actually undergone a full training as a cop at the same police school attended by Billy). The two 'moles,' or 'rats' – according to the terminology used in the two different organisations they join – do no not know each other and only gradually come to know about their reciprocal existence – just to find out that they are even dating the same girl, the police psychiatrist Madolyn Madden (Vera Farmiga). The whole thing is made even more complex when a meeting between Costello and Queenan reveals that, in fact, the boss himself has always been a police informant. Ultimately, *The Departed* is a case of Müllerian mimicry, whereby two apparently complementary species (the police and the gangsters) turn out to actually cooperate through co-evolutionary symmetry. A graphic representation of the circular scheme of deception-in-the-mirror is found in Figure 1.
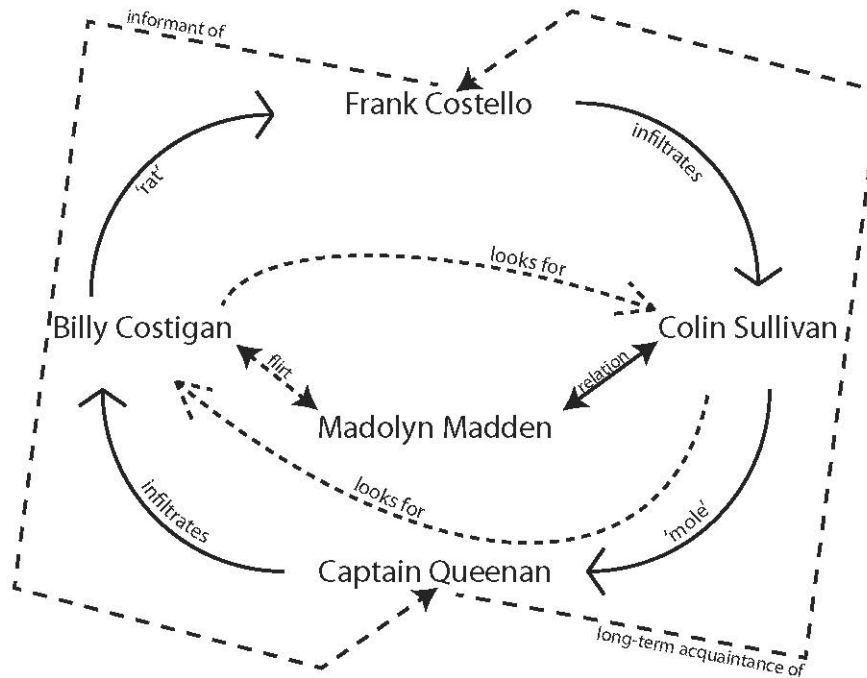
Figure 1: Müllerian mimicry in Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*

The on-going movements of forth-and-back across the line of deception in practice mean that social camouflage is not only, as argued above, an *amplified* version of animal camouflage, but also an *intensified* one. Multiple crossings lead to an intense, confused situation where the infiltrator easily ends up tricked by his own tricks. Under these circumstances, the *camoufleur* may develop a strange, even uncanny sympathy for his model – a 'sympathy for the devil'. The ensuing situation is one of moral collusion, connivance, and blur. It is a situation in which the *camoufleur* is no longer able to recognise the line of deception he has drawn in the first place. This fact leads to straightforward self-deception and a spinning situation that tends to envelop the participants in a semantic web of contradictions. This dynamic is, in other words, the famous *mise en abyme*, the abysmal spinning. Classical filmic evocations can be found, for instance, in Orson Welles' movies such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), where the protagonists enter strange chambers with mirrors that endlessly multiply their figures (see Figure 2). In Deleuze's reading (1985), Welles marks a crucial moment in the theoretical history of cinema: the discovery of the *power of the fake* as something which is no longer subordinated to its opposition to the true, but is rather productive of that very distinction. Once we apply this insight to our case, we find that the line of deception does not separate two regions which would simply stand opposed to each other as true and false. Rather, the line of deception functions as the 'aberrant' conjunction of diverging semiotic regimes, as well as a sliding door through them.

Figure 2: Abysmal spinning in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*

In this section, we have provided a *topographical* mapping of the undercover story. However, such reconstruction is not sufficient, and a *phenomenological* analysis is also called for. Social life cannot be reduced to formal logic alone[10]. Indeed, the linear, multiple and aberrant movements and crossings at stake cannot be fully explained without paying attention to the *modes of existence* that they engender. The life-world, in this sense, provides the horizon where the action is set as well as the cognitive and moral compass that guides its becoming.

The Existential Phenomenology of Camouflage

An undercover agent must grasp as soon as possible, not simply the appearance, but especially the interpretive categories and the moral values of the average member of the group s/he is infiltrating. In Garfinkel's terminology, he must develop a strategy for

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[10] Incidentally, Tarde seems to have been perfectly aware of this fact when, laying out his treaty on the laws of imitation, reserved about 50 pages to logical laws, and more than 200 pages to what he called 'extra-logical influences.'

'passing' in the small community s/he is interested in (albeit temporarily) joining. In general, the difficulty lies in that while, in accordance with Tarde (1890: 219-39), the normal social flow of imitation goes from the inside toward the outside (behaviour follows intention), the infiltrator must somehow turn the procedure the other way around: in this case, it is the production of a credible outer appearance that enables one to progressively grasp the enemy's mind set. In Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991), for instance, Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves), a rookie FBI Agent, is assisting Angelo Pappas (Gary Busey) in trying to crack a series of bank robberies by a gang whose members act disguised as former U.S. Presidents (during robberies they also entertain victims by telling jokes about how presidents have always robbed citizens anyway). A careful analysis of the few available evidences leads the two cops to the surfers' milieu, which Johnny is then required to infiltrate. Johnny suggests a quick solution but is reprimanded by Angelo, who explains to him what is at stake:

> *Johnny*: Why can't I just walk around with this thing [a surfboard] under my arm, and act stoned, ask a few questions?
> *Angelo*: Well, look. Look at 'em. They're like some kind of tribe. They got their own language. You can't just walk up to those guys. You have to get out there and learn the moves… get into their head, pick up the speech.

Infiltrations are especially helpful when the group to be observed is small, closed and exclusive – in short, tribe-like. Cohesion, in this case, is based on strong personal relationships of trust and loyalty. Small-group dynamics determine a tension between group-mind and individual psyche, in that shared myths, usages, protocols and etiquette encapsulate a whole worldview. Not only is the group kept together by codes, symbols, values and organisation, but thanks to them the existence of the group itself is projected as an ultimate value, sometimes even at the expense of individuals and their life. As anthropological theory has long established, what matters most to a group's existence – typically, an ethnic group – is the continual maintenance of boundaries (Barth Ed. 1969). All cultural code is, in this sense, a territorialising, boundary-drawing device. As Barth stressed, the boundary is the only persistent entity in the variable geometry of ethnic affiliation. Following also the classic reflections by Lévi-Strauss (2002) on ethnocentrism, we should not be surprised in finding that, in most cases of practical existence, the reaction towards the face of a foreigner is not the one of the curious scientist who gauges biodiversity, but of the judge who censors and sanctions wrongdoing. 'Wrong' can mean anything and everything – in short, it means *just different*. The alien may become an object of more or less fleeting curiosity, but above all is judged and condemned precisely because of his/her diversity. Interestingly, while followers are unconditional in their philistine hatred towards outsiders, leaders can occasionally be more welcoming – a topic that is itself exploited in several undercover movies. In any case, since infiltration is, in essence, an act of boundary crossing – literally, a trespassing – a whole *immunological* process ensues: the infiltrator is a pathogen germ which, if detected, will be mercilessly contrasted by the host's antibodies – as recalled above, the situation is a life-or-death one.

In the meanwhile, the undercover agent faces a practical problem which is eminently *hermeneutical* – namely, how to conceive the possible *common ground* that spans diverse creatures belonging to different and even incommensurable life worlds. Such a common ground is what the universalist tradition in Western philosophy once used to call 'logical-mathematical essences.' The hermeneutical situation is circular and, not by chance, reminds us of Müllerian mimicry, where it is no longer clear who is taking advantage of whom.[11] As first discussed by Martin Heidegger (1996[1927]) and subsequently elaborated by Hans Georg Gadamer (1976), the hermeneutic circle asserts that interpretative processes have neither proper beginning nor proper end. The circle has, so to speak, no head and no tail. For hermeneutics, given a text – or, more generally, a phenomenon to be interpreted – there is no *neutral* position where to start from. Before attempting any single interpretation, one has already started a number of them, insofar as one lives immersed in one's own cultural and historical pre-understanding. All interpretive knowledge is necessarily set within a specific historical, cultural and psychological horizon of pre-comprehension and is the result of a circular layering of notions and hypotheses. In his proverbially refined prose, Heidegger explained how what appears most immediate and simple, the 'ready-to-hand', is in fact infused in a whole horizon of pre-comprehension:

> The ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality of involvements. This totality need not be grasped explicitly by a thematic interpretation. Even if it has undergone such an interpretation, it recedes into an understanding which does not stand out from the background. And this is the very mode in which it is the essential foundation for everyday circumspective interpretation. In every case this interpretation is grounded in *something we have in advance* – in a *fore-having*. (Heidegger 1996[1927]: 191 [§I.5])

Interestingly, the idea of 'totality of involvements' resonates with Tarde's view on the imitative vector (although any direct connection between Tarde and Heidegger is uncertain). Actually, to say that imitation proceeds *ab interioribus ad exteriora*, from the within towards the without, means that one can only produce a visible imitation – such as a gesture, an act, an attire, or similar – only after an intellectual *metanoia* (conversion) has occurred. As a result, it is very difficult to specify the exact object that is to be imitated (as well as interpreted), as if the whole operation of imitation (and interpretation) could be exercised on something yet un-contoured. The object of imitation and the object of interpretation vanish or systematically recede behind the 'right attitude' produced by an act of conversion in the subject (the imitator, *camoufleur*, or interpreter). How, then, to enact the 'conversion'? How to control and deploy it?

The opening move for a *camoufleur* consists in becoming conscious that one's preconceived ideas about the reality to infiltrate might not be the right ones. Different and unforeseen categories might be called for. With the standard sociological

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[11] In contemporary theoretical biology, Kleisner and Markog (2005) have introduced the notion of 'semetic rings' to explain the functioning of mimicry. In this idea, the centrality of surfaces joins the primacy of a circular procedure (which, with all due qualifications, might be called 'hermeneutical').

terminology of Mauss (1936) and Bourdieu (1977), the *camoufleur* needs to re-functionalise his/her own *habitus*. To that aim, will left to itself is a tricky asset. Indeed, anyone who decides to mask himself or herself using as selection criteria only one's will to do so, is doomed to fail miserably. Indeed, by choosing to wear this or that mask, this or that costume, one unmistakably reveals one's own camouflaging criteria. What the subjects who have decided to disguise themselves on the basis of their own free will deem as a suitable mask offers the best hint to detect them. Wearing a mask that only reflects what is generally *thought about* the group to be joined does not lead anywhere. On the contrary, only a specific, situational and inter-psychological, interactional line of deception can hope to produce some effects. Here emerges the specificity of the infiltrator, who is *commanded* to do what s/he does: in him/her, camouflage begins as an external, objective necessity that enables – or at least, is supposed to enable – him/her achieve a *neutral* consciousness. Goffman would have called this act a specific *reliance on the normal appearances* of a situation, for:

> …his[/her] ease in his[/her] *Umwelt* depends not merely on his being able to divide events around him[/her] into the designed and undesigned, but also on his being confident that these appearances are not merely contrived – unless, of course, it is he himself [she herself] who has contrived them. (Goffman 1971: 314)

From a narrative point of view, the potential impasse of the interpretive circle is often solved thanks to a figure of *mediator*. Ethnographers also call this character the *gatekeeper*. He or she is the one who, more or less deliberately and more or less consciously, smuggles the infiltrator into the group. 'Smuggling' actually denotes nothing else but the hermeneutical establishment of a spanning common ground. For instance, in Larry Ferguson's *Fixing the shadow* (1992) in order to infiltrate a gang of outlaw bikers, the aggressive cop Dan Saxon (Charlie Sheen) undergoes an apprenticeship with an ambivalent bikers' supporter, quite appositely named Virgil (Leon Rippy). This Janus-faced personal coach teaches Dan how to think and behave properly, leading him on the *Road to Hell* (the rock piece by Chris Rea used in the movie soundtrack). The first meeting between Dan and Virgil also establishes a sort of mirror contact between the two (Figure 3). Dan is frustrated by his first failed attempts to pose as dope dealer – in fact, he looks anything but credible. The conversation is, to put it mildly, hilarious:

> *Dan:* Nobody will sell dope to me anyways.
> *Virgil:* That's because of the way you look, man. I mean, look at you. If you came up to me and tried to buy dope, I'd peg you for a narc right away.
> *Dan:* A minute ago, you said I looked like a dealer.
> *Virgil:* Fuck you, asshole. I was trying to be polite.

Figure 3: Dan and Virgil meet in Larry Ferguson's *Fixing the shadow*

Nonetheless, Virgil decides to help Dan because, he confidentially confesses, 'I've always wanted to be cop'. After several contingent shortcomings, the gatekeeper effectively manages to have Dan access the gang. Notably, Virgil functions as a *code* for Dan: while the former has learnt the rules on the field, scrap by scrap, in a long biographic apprenticeship, the second can have them conveniently served and systematised.

Similarly, in *Point Break*, Johnny does not initially know anything about the milieu he is going to infiltrate. His naivety is graphically rendered by his not being able to even surf. This time, the gatekeeper is a character named Tyler Endicott (Lori Petty), a surfer who first saves Johnny from drowning and then gives him his first surfing classes (predictably, they will start a relationship). However, the common ground between Johnny and Tyler is built artificially: Johnny makes up a fictional personal past to deliberately captivate Tyler's emotions. Johnny is then introduced by Tyler to Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), the charismatic leader of the gang and veritable surf philosopher. The uncontested alpha male of the group, Bodhi develops sympathy for Johnny. When the latter is attacked by a second gang of surfers, Bodhi rescues him and their friendship is strengthened. Incidentally, this is the moment when Johnny realises he is

still not credible as a surfer and continues to look like a yuppie instead (Figure 4). Anticipating their rebuke, he addresses a crew of aggressive surfers as follows:

> Johnny: Okay. I know. This is where you tell me all about how locals rule, and yuppie insects like me shouldn't be surfing your break and all that, right?

Figure 4: Johnny confronts aggressive surfers in Kathryn Bigelow's *Point Break*

Bodhi's libertarian philosophy, his dislike for violence and his relentless search to live life at its fullest increasingly captivate Johnny. Indeed, we find out that the motivation behind the robberies is more the thrill than the money. Such a sympathy for the devil is pushed to the point that, once Johnny is finally able to predict the next robbery, he intervenes, this time as FBI agent but, at the end of a breath-taking chase, cannot determine himself to shoot at Bodhi – the only way to stop him – and thus lets him escape. At the very end of the movie, after hunting him throughout the globe, and having finally located him on a distant shore in Australia, instead of arresting him, once again Johnny lets Bodhi go surfing the 'great wave' he has always been longing for, which will most probably kill him.

The psychological consequences of the zone of indistinction are also emphasised in *Fixing the shadow*. Here, Dan becomes increasingly exasperated by his fictive role to the point of becoming a frantic murderer of the gang leader – in psychoanalytical terms, an almost literal case of *abjection*. *Donnie Brasco* (1997) by Mike Newell stages an analogous situation, in that we see the *camoufleur* becoming psychologically more and more similar to the Mafiosi he lives among. Set in 1970s New York City, *Donnie Brasco* tells the story of the actually existing Joseph D. Pistone (Johnn Depp), an FBI undercover agent who successfully infiltrated a powerful Mafia family. Under the name of Donnie, Joseph becomes a man of Lefty Ruggiero (Al Pacino), an elderly Mafioso who brings him into contact with the milieu and grants that he is no cop. Under the immediate personal influence of Lefty, Joseph/Donnie increasingly poses himself as a Mafioso even in his private life, terrifying his wife. More recently, in Rob Cohen's *Fast and Furious* (2001) the undercover cop Brian O'Conner (Paul Walker)

infiltrates a gang of illegal street racers who hijack trucks containing electronic equipment. The gang is led by Dominic Toretto (Vin Diesel), with whom Brian develops a close tie. At the end of the movie, Brian and Dominic engage in a chase resembling an actual street race. Dominic eventually crashes but, instead of arresting him, Brian gives him the keys to his own car so that Dominic can escape capture.

What do such recurrent 'aberrant' alliances, which are the best symptom of self-deception, suggest? Cultural codes are experienced in a more or less naturalised way. At the end-point of socialisation, fluent competence is taken for granted, to the point that it becomes invisible to a person belonging in the cultural horizon at stake. The competent member is often described as 'fluent', and such fluency is precisely what the *camoufleur* must prize the highest. The naturalness of being in one's environment, of being at ease, however, is all but natural. On the contrary, it is a long-term achievement that can only stem from an enduring, even stubborn commitment. It forms part of a 'know-how' of practical action that resists being reduced to a 'know-that' of formalised information. Similar habitus can only be acquired over a life-time. The problem for the camoufleur is that in many cases he must go through speeded-up socialisation, recapitulating the moral career of a gang member in just a few days or weeks. Under these circumstances, the major risk is remaining coarse in emulation, being *nearly* there instead of *just* there. For the purpose of producing the ordinary, the imperfection that comes in the form of *nonchalance* is more perfect and effective than actual mimic perfection. This type of imperfection, it should be remarked, stands at the polar opposite of the plastic sandals of the desperate undercover hippy described by Motörhead's frontman Lemmy Kilmister in the opening quote of the previous section. For, indeed, the latter is precisely that frigid replica which, being *nearly* close to the model, couldn't practically be more remote from it.

In the first section, we have introduced three possible models of animal camouflage. As we have seen, Stevens and Merilaita identify two general visibility strategies, namely, those preventing detection (crypsis) and those preventing recognition (masquerade). On the other hand, Bates introduces a three-fold typology based on the triangular relation mimic–model–receiver. For his part, Caillois adds to crypsis (which he calls becoming-furniture) and masquerade (becoming-another-one) a third strategy, namely the hyper-expressive becoming-monstrous. In light of this, it seems that the infiltrator mobilises all three models. First, following Bates' requirements, a good infiltrator must mimic a model in order to cheat the receiver – except that in most cases the receiver is also the model. Here lies the source of all the hermeneutic difficulties we have outlined so far. The mimic is painfully aware of an obvious yet vanishing truth: s/he cannot immediately access the mind of his/her enemies, and is accordingly doomed to work his/her way 'backward', producing a set of resemblances which are hopefully going to conjure up the right meaning. Second, referring to Stevens and Merilaita, certainly an infiltrator is not nearly as cryptic as, for instance, a sniper. Nonetheless, the much sought-for fluency resembles crypsis more than masquerade. In the animal domain, recognition is often prevented by assuming the appearance of uninteresting objects. The case with human camouflage might be

different, tough. Here is where the third strategy appears. For instance, in *Point Break*, Johnny is recognised by Bodhi as ex-football champion (which he really was, before enrolling in the FBI), and this fact reassures the surfers that he is no spy. In *Fixing the Shadow*, upon his first arrival at the bikers' camp, Dan scares one biker to death by carelessly handling dynamite cylinders, thus drawing the attention of the gang leader, who approves of his bravery. In both cases, we see the infiltrator looking like an excessive, even imposing figure.

Whether he opts for the low profile (furniture) or for the challenging stance (monster), the last thing the infiltrator wants is look like someone who doesn't want to attract attention. *That* would be fatal indeed. Caution is needed even (or especially) in bravery, given that it is only *after* the right change of mind has occurred that the infiltrator can know what this other s/he is impersonating may actually regard as furniture or monster. This means that, using Caillois' terminology, it is becoming-another-one that is crucially presupposed by the other two strategies. In many cases, however, the three functions of mimicry are called for simultaneously: if becoming-another-one serves as the fundamental trigger of the hermeneutic circle, the real *télos* is to appear fluent and, only *qua* fluent, furniture-like. Sooner of later, as we have seen, a moment of becoming-monstrous inevitably comes, when the infiltrator, subject to a series of increasingly difficult and taxing tests, will – for the good or for the bad – erupt.

The Paradoxes of Camouflage, or, Learning to Desire

> I believe that you can reach the point where there is no longer any difference between developing the habit of pretending to believe and developing the habit of believing. It's the old story of spies: they infiltrate the secret service of the enemy, they develop the habit of thinking like the enemy, and if they survive, it's because they have succeeded. And before long, predictably, they go over to the other side, because it has become theirs. Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*

Why does camouflage tend to produce such contradictory situations often leading to that dead-end where deception ends up in self-deception? By raising this question, we are also pushed to attend a broader one: does the situation of the undercover agent as *camoufleur* illustrate some more general aspects of the social experience? Because we suspect the latter hypothesis is correct, we want to reserve to *self-deception* a specific importance in the explanation of the capacity of social life to transcend the sheer game of formal logic. Self-deception illuminates something important about the production of meaning. Following surface theorists, from Simmel (2009[1908]:§IX) through Goffman (1956) to Deleuze (1969), the layer of meaning is not the deepest one, and is not psychoanalytically sunk in the depths of the unconscious: quite on the contrary, meaning *lies at the surface*, it is a surface-effect. Meaning is generated in a

region of interface, in other words *at the boundary* – for boundaries are spaces contradistinguished by discontinuity and heterogeneity.[12]

The boundary space is that surface space where two powers substantiating camouflage meet, creating the movable *line of deception* introduced above. First is *the power of imperfection*. Imperfection, as argued above, is more perfect than perfection, insofar as it means fluency, *nonchalance*, carelessness in immersiveness. No mastery comes without fluency, no fluency without imperfection. Second is *the power of the neuter*, the power of being neither properly active nor passive: as stated by the famous Chinese camouflage artist Artist Liu Bolin, 'I chose to merge with the environment. Instead of saying that I simply disappear into the background, it would be better to say that the environment has engulfed me and that I cannot afford to choose to be either active or passive' (quoted in Mattei 2013: 11). This recipe for effectiveness through neutrality has been examined in-depth by the sinologist François Jullien (1997), and little can be added to his masterful analyses.

Imperfection and neutrality evoke the fact that camouflage is about not only a form of deception, but also quintessentially *charm*. The *camoufleur* does not merely pretend to be; instead, he casts a spell. To be able to *speak* to the target to be swindled entails saying something both the model and the receiver already *want* to hear. The vocal register is remarkable here, insofar as it resonates with a problem so well summarised by Sloterdijk (2007[1998]: 479): 'How can it be that for billions of messages, I am a rock on which their waves break, while certain voices and instructions unlock me and make me tremble as if I were the chosen instrument to render them audible, a medium and mouthpiece simply for their urge to sound?' In our rendering: not only must the *camoufleur* abandon his/her own vision of the world to take on his enemy's, s/he must also, and especially, attain that type of vocal performance capable of spelling, enchanting, breaking the resistance, suspiciousness, hostility and repugnance of both the model and the receiver. If voices can sometimes be charming, the actual deepest relationship between the vocal register and magic is a much deeper one: charm, in a sense, is *vocal* by essence. Voice, understood as *Stimmung*, or 'vocation', is that underdetermined territory between cry, noise, chant and music which makes camouflage possible at all.

How, then, can there be a place for self-deception? Self-defeat occurs, as we have seen, as a manifestation of *aberrance*. It proclaims the failure of functionality. Pushed to its extreme, camouflage inevitably turns into self-defeat. What, then, would a non-functionalist, or more-than-functionalist, interpretation of camouflage suggest? As hypothesised at the outset of this piece, human social camouflage is not only an amplified version of animal camouflage, it is also an *intensified* one – we should better say, it *can* be amplified because, in the first place, it *is* intensive. In this sense, theorists of imitative behaviour could profit from the case of camouflage, for it provides

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[12] A veritable axiom in topology is, precisely, that the 'boundary of the boundary' is an empty set. Engaging the boundary is also essential in territoriology (Brighenti 2010).

perhaps the neatest illustration of a process that, while apparently laid out in artifice and deliberate action, ends up strengthening the more-than-functional, intensive, constitutive nature of the social relation vis-à-vis the related parts.

Conclusions

In this piece, we have reviewed and highlighted different facets of the phenomenon of camouflage, ranging from its biological functions to its inner logic, from its existential phenomenology to its unexpected outcomes. Through the theoretical lenses of Tarde, Caillois, Goffman and others, we have pointed out the tension between, on the one hand, camouflage as a strategic deployment-achievement and, on the other, camouflage as a force of social life (the latter to be understood as distinct from both biological and psychological life). Using the playful and 'baroque' example of undercover movies, we have suggested that, similarly to camouflage, social life also entails an unsettling game constitutively played out 'at the limits of control'. Such tension emerges most distinctly when we notice how, at the basis of an effective camouflage, we find the paradoxical powers of neutrality and imperfection. The 'aberrant moves' across the line of deception deeply transform the initial image of social camouflage: so, while at first camouflage appears as a deliberate tool and artifice, a means deployed by someone (the camoufleur) to an end (infiltration), in reality, by acting artificially, the actor ends up being 'artefacted' by his/her own artifices. In the paper, we have tried to understand which modes of existence correspond to such a 'zone of indistinction' between the natural and the artificial.

At the time of digital social networks, where the construction of one's persona and the online presentation of self is believed to be common currency, the discourse of authenticity – 'be real with me or stay away' – seems to be resurfacing in ways Adorno (1973[1964]) might have found appalling. As 'fake' becomes a despicable term, however, not much attention is paid to the fact that being 'fake' is far from a simple achievement. After all, camouflage behaviour could reveal more about the camoufleur than even his/her 'real' face. Who then grants the reality of realness? In the present context, we have suggested that an in-depth research engagement with a quintessentially 'natural-artificial' phenomenon such as camouflage might be advantageous for contemporary social theory. Overall, our hypothesis is that camouflage could be regarded as an indelible dimension of any relation to the *socius*. Observing and deconstructing certain specific cases of social camouflage – such as those related to infiltration and practices of passing – we have picked an extreme example to magnify elements which, we suspect, may be much more molecularly diffuse in social life.

By detecting various problematic, tricky and 'aberrant' aspects of camouflage, we have simply dented the surface of a complex, challenging issue, one that surely deserves further analyses. One provisional insight concerns the fact that camouflage is not necessarily only about believing and make-believe but also, and perhaps above all,

about desiring, as well as the social transmission of unmanaged or never fully manageable desire, even when what is desired or imitated is not exactly clear. Camouflage is an apprenticeship in desire. Learning to desire is also that component of camouflage that pushes its consequences to systematically spin out of control. While this does not mean that consequences *always and necessarily* get out of control, it means that *the limits of control* are what is constitutively called into play in similar adventures.

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