

## How to Disappear Completely (Into Surveillance Video): Peter Bergmann and the North Pond Hermit

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In the summer of 2009, a man boards a bus for Sligo, Ireland. When he arrives, he checks into a local hotel for three nights under the name Peter Bergmann. While there, he hires a taxi to take him to the beach for a swim, posts letters to friends, and, on the whole, plays the part of a salaryman on holiday. On the third day, he is seen walking along the edge of the water at Rosses Point. The following morning, his lifeless body is found washed up on the beach. Curiously, the medical examiner finds no evidence of drowning. What he does find, however, are numerous tumors and an advanced prostate condition. As the police try to track down the deceased man's next-of-kin, they learn that the address he gave to the hotel clerk traces back to a vacant lot in Austria. After running the man's profile through numerous databases, it becomes apparent that "Peter Bergmann" does not exist. The mystery deepens when the police discovers that the labels have been meticulously removed from each article of clothing found on his body and that the man seemed to go to great lengths to avoid social interactions during his three-day stay. The only remaining option for putting together the pieces of this man's final hours would be offered by the CCTV footage from the town's extensive surveillance system. Yet, upon studying this archive, it becomes clear that Mr. Bergmann has not only anticipated this course of action, but carefully orchestrated the images of his last days.

The camera in the hotel lobby shows the man leaving his room several times a day. Each time, he is carrying a purple plastic bag. Following his route through Sligo via its network of surveillance cameras, the police realize that the bag is emptied at some point during these trips. Yet, without fail, the moment of discarding the contents of the bag invariably takes place off-camera, between surveillance zones. This act is repeated multiples times until the bag itself is eventually discarded, an act that also occurs out of the view of a camera. The police are convinced that the man is consciously liquidating his possessions in the gaps of the town's extensive surveillance system. An officer following the case succinctly articulates the contradictions of this performance in the short film *The Last Days of Peter Bergmann* (dir. Ciaran Cassidy, 2013). He states, "Whilst he had no difficulty with people seeing him on the CCTV and his movements, he certainly went to great lengths to ensure that the property he disposed of was never found, because that is not identifiable anywhere on any of the CCTV . . . He left a footprint, basically on CCTV." Peter Bergmann came to this place to disappear and paradoxically elicited the gaze of the security camera to orchestrate his performance.



Figure 1 Surveillance footage of the man calling himself Peter Bergmann

Mr. Bergmann's project reverses the directionality of disappearance, presenting the prospect that one might disappear *through* or *into* rather than *from* the image of surveillance. This inversion is prompted by becoming a "perfect" subject of surveillance—excessively performative, overtly visible, and yet, always only partially on display. Through this perverse mimicry, Bergmann reconfigures the play between presence and absence that animates the surveillance network in terms of the dialectical relations of camouflage. For the operation of camouflage to be effective, not only must there be some realized advantage that shatters the relations of invisibility (a

shot fired from a hidden soldier or an asset that eludes detection only to strategically appear elsewhere), but the concealed themselves must also understand their absence in terms of visibility. Since one is only invisible insofar as one is seen as such, to disappear is not simply to escape from view, but to forge a particular presence. Bringing these relations to bear on the city's network of CCTV cameras, Bergmann's performance inverts the central premise of surveillance. Instead of rendering an absent subject present, the camera is now complicit with his disappearance. Its processes of representation and the compulsory visibility that it engenders serve as vehicles for a specific mode of auto-eradication in which the subject is successfully effaced or concealed to the extent that he reveals his absence.

The capacity of the surveillance camera to be coopted by processes of erasure is bolstered by the close relationship that camouflage maintains to discourses of automation and modern media. Hanna Rose Shell observes that camouflage was born out of an explicitly photographic context. In fact, it was originally defined as "systematic dissimulation for the purposes of concealment from photographic detection."<sup>1</sup> This shared historical evolution is reinforced by a conceptual overlap between these phenomena. In particular, the contradictions of placing one's invisibility on display strike a resonance with the disappearance of the human that the medium of photography visualizes at a categorical level. As Ann Banfield argues, "[T]he thing seen [in the photograph] doesn't need [the operator/viewer] to be there to be seen. The photograph is precisely . . . [the] 'world *seen* without a self.'"<sup>2</sup> However, in photography, this unique vantage point still relies upon the critical decision to record and, to that extent, inevitably reaffirms the operator's presence. On the other hand, the automated system of CCTV not only functions without intervention, but is also indiscriminate in its uninterrupted capture of reality. This is not to say that its operation is in any way neutral, but rather that the CCTV camera does not typically select its subjects. Presenting a stationary and unresponsive gaze that records without discrimination, it fully realizes the absence that the photographic camera can only articulate episodically and with outside intervention.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the medium provides for the confluence of symbolic and literal disappearance that Bergmann's narrative requires.



*Figure 2 Bergmann is seen in a bus terminal and an empty street in Silgo. In the image on the right he carries the purple plastic bag.*

A thin, silver-haired man walks in and out of the frame of surveillance footage in Cassidy's short film. It/this/he is a spectral body, a placeholder rather than a proper noun, a threshold around which some absent figure has commandeered the relations of visibility and invisibility so as to auto-erase via media-assisted suicide. The more we learn about this man from the surveillance footage, the less we know. The more he appears, the more he recedes. Despite this irresolvable enigma, an intense affective component springs from this relation to the image. Wandering through the hotel lobby, disconnected from narrative and unstuck in time, his existential loneliness seems to push up against the epistemological boundaries of suicide. This produces what Marie-José Mondzain describes in a different context as the "death of the image in the image of death."<sup>4</sup> In the process, a nuanced and even counter-intuitive mode of surveillance is articulated. Bergmann's narrative suggests that as much as CCTV cameras, data mining, and GPS tracking intrude upon privacy and repress otherwise free expressions of selfhood, the compulsory visibility that these apparatuses engender simultaneously produces immanent and depersonalized relations of sociality, identity, and place. These relations can then be harvested, redirected, and made use of. In short, surveillance comes to function as a medium for both the surveyor *and* the surveyed. Contrasting Bergmann's project to a more recent attempt at disappearance not only draws out the larger ramifications of inverting the Romantic models of escape and resistance that tend to structure our discussions of surveillance, but also sheds light on the unique conceptions of space that this project relies upon.



*Figure 3 Surveillance footage shows a man believed to be Christopher Knight burglarizing a home in 2002*

In the spring of 2013, Christopher Thomas Knight emerged from the Maine woods for the first time in twenty-seven years. Dubbed the “North Pond Hermit,” Knight had become something of a legend by the time he was finally apprehended. For years, locals reported the mysterious disappearance of items from their homes, but somehow he was purportedly only seen once by human eyes in his nearly three decades of isolation. (According to Knight, he passed a hiker in the woods one day and casually said, “Hi.”)

The lore of the “North Pond Hermit” reached a new level in 2002. After “the hungry man” raided one house’s pantry several times, frustrated family members decided to set up a camera. The images they acquired were circulated among locals in the hopes that they might lead to the Hermit’s capture. However, this only succeeded in building a mythology around this mysterious figure. Food, books, and clothing continued to go missing until 2013, when Sergeant Terry Hughes installed a motion detector in the kitchen of the Pine Tree summer camp. The device was connected to an alarm at his house, located a few minutes away. Scavenging in the kitchen, Knight had no

idea that he had triggered the system until the headlights appeared. He was arrested and sentenced to seven months in jail after he admitted to committing over a thousand burglaries during his time in the woods.

Following a Romantic ideal of isolation, the North Pond Hermit conceived of disappearance in Manichean terms. For him, not being seen would produce a necessary and productive loss of self. Knight explains:

Solitude did increase my perception. But here's the tricky thing—when I applied my increased perception to myself, I lost my identity. With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself; I became irrelevant . . . I didn't even have a name.<sup>5</sup>

The understated grandiosity of these confessions suggests that Knight had answered a lure of negativity rooted in enduring narratives of redemption, self-actualization, and rebirth. In other words, his project was built upon a Waldenesque narrative of seclusion that purports to return the self to the self through prolonged asceticism. However, this retreat is necessarily temporary because the actualization of this “true” self requires an external reflection to confirm its arrival. Accordingly, “the hero” must return to the community in spectacular and public fashion to reap the rewards of his self-imposed banishment. Read in these terms, Knight’s collapse of identity conveys a potentiality that is awaiting an external gaze that might render identity, time, and reality once again legible. This loss of self and overall sense of depersonalization are then symptoms of a failure to actualize, which results from an inability or unwillingness to be seen. The result is a tenuous suspension of becoming that illustrates what Leo Bersani describes as “the susceptibility of all potential being to nothingness—as if potentiality could itself *fail to ‘take place,’* . . . [and] could tilt the universe backward into the void.”<sup>6</sup> In this suspension, the gaze of surveillance could not be recuperated and would only corrupt this Romantic process of reflection. It would interrupt the boundaries upon which its dual movement of retreat and return rely.





Figure 4 A Diagram of Knight's Camp in Maine Woods.

These relationships manifest spatially in the camp of the North Pond Hermit. The site speaks to a particular form of movement comprised of tortured rituals of transgressing spaces without leaving a trace and remaining out of view. It required Knight to constantly cover his tracks by only leaving the camp under the cover of darkness and forgoing movement altogether in the winters to avoid leaving footprints in the snow. Surrounded by boulders and trees, the camp itself took on this anxiety of the threshold in its disconnect from the outside. This disconnect was so absolute that the site could only expand downward, leaving Knight to bury mounds of refuse, magazines, and empty propane tanks under his camp. The strict division of labor that structured its interior (e.g., a clothesline for drying clothes, a delineated wash area, a clearly defined space for cooking) reiterates the logic of what Deleuze calls “striated space.”<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Peter Bergmann’s project relied upon the continual crossing of thresholds, a constant piercing of boundaries both within and between frames—the demarcations of cities and towns, the frame of the image of surveillance, and the spatial enclosures of selfhood and identity. These movements are represented materially in the flux of the surveillance footage. They appear in the intervals that open between sequences and in which the strategic undecidability of his narrative resides. Here, the atomized, modular, and boundary-laden space of the North Pond Hermit’s

camp gives way to “smooth space,” a fluid, immanent and deterritorialized mode of spatiality that intertwines visibility and invisibility.<sup>8</sup> Bergmann produced his disappearance by moving through these variegated fields of visibility and invisibility; the North Pond Hermit attempted to shield himself from this drama and was seared by the light of surveillance in the process.

It is in this regard that these two case studies offer productive frames of reference for approaching distributed modes of digital surveillance. Most immediately, these projects reaffirm the always already-ness of surveillance that the digital world seems to confirm at every turn. However, their larger relevance to systems of “lateral surveillance,” “social surveillance,” and even “sousveillance” stems from a shared recognition of the dynamic symmetry that is formed when the operations of surveillance take place via the same media platforms as those of identity formation. The story of the North Pond Hermit suggests that the practice of oppositional detachment is problematic not so much because of its sheer impossibility (although this is increasingly the case), but rather because it denies the necessity of representation. Knight, after all, eventually succumbs to the apparatus by way of a loss of identity and, perhaps by extension, a need for the image. On the other hand, by staging his disappearance within the image, Bergmann’s project presents a mode of opposition that is more compatible with network-based modes of surveillance. In light of the digital world’s Berkeley-esque conflation of being and being seen,<sup>9</sup> Bergmann’s refusal of an outside exemplifies Jacques Lacan’s idea of “traversing the fantasy.”<sup>10</sup> For Lacan, this is the moment when the subject no longer tries to reclaim the loss, but rather comes to understand this loss as the structural basis for subjectivity. From this perspective, the capacity for redefinition and becoming that defines the modulated surveillance apparatus appears as both the mechanism of control and the means by which these relations might be co-opted for alternate ends. In this way, the haunting images that Bergmann left behind offer a blueprint for producing instances of inversion and *détournement* of the engines of data capture that populate these networks of surveillance. They envision a mode of practice in which a similarly performative self might animate the non-visual “data-double[s]” that structure our everyday lives.<sup>11</sup> Achieving such a counter-positionality might recoup the absences and blind spots of the network as a form of radical alterity.



### Notes:

1. Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 14.
2. Ann Banfield, "L'Imparfait de l'Objectif: the Imperfect of the Object Glass," *Camera Obscura* 8, no. 3 24 (1990): 64-87, 81. Banfield's reference to a "world *seen* without a self" comes from Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Press, 1951), 247. The emphasis in the quote is Banfield's.
3. Jean Baudrillard reaffirms such a position, suggesting that this absence haunts all images. This even includes those that explicitly focus on human presence. He writes, "Photography conveys the state of the world in our absence. The lens explores that absence. Even in emotionally charged faces and bodies, it is still this absence it explores." The empty chair in Baudrillard's photograph *Sainte Beuve* (1987) is something like the seat of photography itself. The distant impressions of an absent body bear witness to the eradication of the subject, which, in turn, give life to a world organized around this sacrifice. Jean Baudrillard, "Photographies," *European Graduate School*, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/photographies/>.
4. Marie-José Mondzain, "Can Images Kill?," trans. Sally Shafto, *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2009): 20-51, 21.
5. Michael Finkel, "The Strange & Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit," *GQ*, Aug. 4, 2014, <http://www.gq.com/story/the-last-true-hermit>.
6. Leo Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 2 (2006), 161-174, 173. Emphasis added.
7. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 1987), 474-500.
8. Ibid
9. Bishop Berkeley is well-known for using the phrase "*esse est percipi*" ("to be is to be perceived") to critique materialism and the existence of mind independent entities in the world. See *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982).
10. Lacan himself asked, "How can a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy experience the drive?" in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1973; New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 273. Slavoj Žižek popularized the phrase "traversing the fantasy" and used it to build upon Lacan's ideas.

11. Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, "The Surveillant Assemblage," *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (2000): 605-622, 611.

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