

# Becoming Invisible: The Ethics and Politics of Imperceptibility

## Abstract

This speculative essay examines 'invisible' social identities and the processes by which they are manifested and occasionally sought. Using various literary and academic sources, and loosely informed by an unlikely combination of Stoic philosophy and post-structuralist politics, we argue that invisibility is conventionally viewed as undesirable or 'suffered' by individuals or groups that are disadvantaged or marginalised within society. While appreciating this possibility, we argue that social invisibility can also be the result of strategies carefully conceived and consciously pursued. We suggest that forms of social invisibility can be acquired by ethically informed personal action as well as by politically informed collective action. In this context, invisibility can be seen as a strategy of escaping from institutionalised and organizational judgements and which presents a challenge to common notions of voice and identity.

## Keywords

Illegibility, imperceptibility, indifference, invisibility, silence, withdrawal

## Introduction

'To go unnoticed is by no means easy.' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 308)

In his memoir *Portrait of an Invisible Man* Paul Auster (1982) writes of his attempts to 'find' his recently deceased father<sup>1</sup>. Sam Auster was, according to his son, a man in 'retreat'. He had become 'an invisible man. Invisible to others and most likely invisible to himself as well' (Auster, 1982, 7). Sam maintained a form of social life, but in his engagement with others, in his habits, dress and almost every part of his life he manifested at best a benign absence, 'he did not seem to be a man occupying space, but rather a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man. The world bounced off him, at times adhered to him - but it never got through' (*ibid.*). After a lifetime spent steadily, and stealthily, reducing all sense of presence the only thing left was to die. This he achieved suddenly and without warning after a lifetime of health. Save for a momentary shock at the nature of his passing, his death moved no-one. There was really nothing to miss. Auster mourns not his loss, but a life lost.

Auster's frustrations are clear, not only as a child fruitlessly striving for connection, but as an adult repelled by his father's relentless indifference to both sensual and intellectual pleasures. Then, sorting through the remnants of a life, Auster chances upon a terrible family secret. While the author does not present this as a convenient explanation for his father's absence, the account suggests a man traumatised into excusing himself from the world. It is not surprising that Sam Auster confounded all who knew him. His behaviour contradicts common expectations about what a life is for. A worthwhile life supposedly requires us to 'make something of ourselves'. By achieving and maintaining identities that mark us as people of substance, people with qualities, modern human beings strive to establish a place in the world. In darker moments many of us may acknowledge our

inevitable impermanence, but nonetheless work to leave a trace. By manufacturing extensions of ourselves, such as essays like this, we create reminders that our existence will amount to something.

Sam refused all of this. Is it enough then to explain his behaviour as pathological or perverse, a withdrawal caused by a secret trauma? As the attitude of a man too damaged to simply understand what was required of him and to manifest socially acceptable responses? Perhaps Auster would not accept his father as a man of principle, but it might be that his withdrawal, his achievement of the unexceptional, was the result of a set of behaviours rigorously and consistently applied. For this person invisibility might have been understood as a matter of choice. A prosperous, white middle class man faced with all the pressures to make his mark, decided instead to leave no trace. But this type of rejection is not, we will argue, readily understood. Within the social and organizational sciences there is a general sense that identity is seen as either as the result of deliberate strategies of creation or as an unintended consequence of the actions of others. In both cases, perhaps unsurprisingly, identity is something which can be 'identified', 'recognised' and therefore talked about.

Clearly there is a strong visual motif that informs such ideas. In this speculative essay which conjoins our readings of literary sources with social theory, we assess the implications for identity creation if we begin with a different visual motif, that of invisibility. How can it help understand attempts to reject or throw off identity? The speculative argument that we develop is twofold, and we illustrate it with our readings<sup>2</sup> of a variety of sources from literature and the human sciences. First, we suggest that the preoccupation of contemporary social and organizational theory with understanding the production of social identities has tended to ignore those who reject or avoid such identities. Where such refusals are studied, it is usually with regard to oppositional or antagonistic identities have been pursued or created in order to produce difference from the dominant. We, on the other hand, are interested in situations where individuals disassociate from identification so far as to achieve a form of 'invisibility'. If so many parts of our lives are driven by the need to be seen, to be *recognised*, then what informs the opposite desire; to structure our relationship with the world in order to produce illegibility and imperceptibility (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 308 *passim*)?

Secondly, we note that such 'invisibility' is most often viewed as undesirable or 'suffered' by individuals or groups that are disadvantaged, marginalised or abject within society, and that this is an assumption widely held within much social theory, including critical theory and radical materialism (Honneth 2003, Bataille 1999). However we suggest that social invisibility need not result from neglect or apathy, what Honneth calls 'looking through' someone as if they didn't matter or Bataille understands as a founding exclusion which constitutes the social, but instead can be the result of a careful and conscious strategy. It is precisely because these activities are conducted with care and attention that this form of invisibility is possible since it requires skilful navigation of the institutional pressures which serve to construct and control many identities. In a contemporary social context which is marked by strivings for recognition and respect at work and in personal life, where collaboration and interactivity are seemingly inherently valuable and where worth requires the affirmation of impact, there is something very challenging about trying to become invisible. When our organizations and our leisure endlessly utters the injunction to be someone, to cultivate our distinctiveness and live our dreams, it is often difficult to understand the refusal of such demands as anything other than failure. We argue, loosely informed by the Stoic tradition and forms of poststructuralist politics, that forms of social invisibility might be acquired by

informed action. It can also, we think, be understood as a collective attempt to evade the gaze of power, because silence cannot always be taken to mean assent.

Three caveats, before we begin. The idea of 'invisibility' assumes that the eye is what we are concerned with here, but there are a series of related metaphors which might have done this work too. Being heard, having a voice, being silenced, are all ideas that rely on the primacy of the voice. There are also a set of terms which seem to assume that understanding is the key issue, being illegible, incomprehensible, misunderstood; as well as a form of language which focuses on attention - being ignored, marginalised, made small, abject or insignificant. Whilst all these terms have different nuances, they collectively represent a sense that a lack of perception is a problem, hence imperceptibility, and moreover a problem solved by their antonyms. The idea that being seen, heard, or understood is a desired state is what this essay seeks to question, and though we will take visibility to be the dominant metaphor because it seems to be the most common one, all of the others do similar work.

Second, and extending the problem with terminology here, we use the metaphor of invisibility because we think it has rhetorical force. It echoes and collects a lot of the literary references and social theory we use here, but it shouldn't be taken too literally. Better words here – and ones that we also use throughout the essay – are 'imperceptible' or 'illegible'. Both terms suggest that the viewer knows that something might be present, but finds it difficult to see, or difficult to understand. It is nicely captured (and this term is itself interesting) in Deleuze and Guattari's insistence of speaking about 'becoming', and not being, in which 'becoming imperceptible' is understood as a difficult state of affairs to cultivate, and one related to always being in movement (2004: 308). It suggests a relation between viewer and viewed, and not a singular state of affairs, and this needs to be borne in mind as you read the essay.

Third, it must also be noted that many of the groups considered to be 'invisible' can, from another perspective, be characterised via an 'assumed' visibility. From this perspective such groups are 'visible' since they are different and therefore marginalised. In contrast, it is the dominant groups who are invisible because their embodiment of the norm makes them unseeable as objects of analysis and therefore critique. For example, white heterosexual males enjoy the privilege produced by being the 'bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood' (Butler, 1990, 9). Following this logic, visibility results from deviating from this assumed standard. Though we recognise the force of this characterization, we do not consider it further below. This is because we are interested here in the desire to become invisible, to escape the trap of identification, rather than assuming that a norm is invisible because ubiquitous and hence that visibility is consequently forced on a person or group because of their difference. We want to explore invisibility as a strategy, not an assumption about universality.

We begin by exploring the idea of 'identity', a common concept in contemporary social and organizational theory, but that one we believe might not help us to think about our object of enquiry. We then move to consider what sort of concepts and practices might help us understand 'invisibility' and its related terms, noting that a politics of identity tends to draw us towards voice, visibility and so on. The paper then considers two ways to understand the invisible, understood as a practice of withdrawal, either through a version of Stoic ethics which stresses individual choices, or a poststructuralist version of collective exodus from

the surveillance of power. We conclude with some thoughts about the paradoxes of making the invisible visible, and the problems of writing and researching about refusal and absence.

## **The Traps of Identity**

Why does identity matter? The contemporary global north is commonly characterised as experiencing a series of rapid and fundamental changes in social relations because of accelerations of time and movement. As a consequence, it is said, relationships become fleeting connections, what Bauman and Tester (2001, 89) refer to as 'disembedding without re-embedding'. Disembedding means that identities detach from established forms. This has long been contrasted with life in pre-modern society where people supposedly found their identity by coming to know and accept their ascribed role in society and the wider spiritual order (Durkheim 1893). Life was to find 'one's place' and execute the duties associated with that position honourably.

But many commentators have suggested that disembedding is not a freedom from the ties that bind; rather it demands that recognition is something that always must be worked at, otherwise anomie will follow. This means that the realisation of our aspirations is tied to the striving for desirable roles, a process of making oneself visible in particular ways. As David Riesman put it in 1950, the 'inner directed' individual is replaced by the 'other directed' type. Giddens (1991) argues that in 'high modernity' the self becomes a reflexive project and, in the context of work, one important way this is worked on is through the idea of 'career'. For example, for Du Gay, employees are encouraged to become 'entrepreneurs of the self', seeking self-improvement both in their work and leisure (see also Webb 2004). As Du Gay (1996, 181) explains, this is '[b]ecause a human being is considered to be continuously engaged in a project to shape his or her life as an autonomous, choosing individual driven by the desire to optimize the worth of his or her own existence, life for that person is represented as a single arena for the pursuit of that endeavour'. Emphasis is therefore placed on the development of a personal biography in which our choices represent us to ourselves and others. Individuals are encouraged to examine their talents and passions and pursue a path that might allow them to achieve. 'We' strive to become what 'we' think 'we' should be.

If this broad diagnosis is accepted then it is unsurprising that much contemporary effort in the social sciences has been devoted to theorising and researching the process of 'identity work' undertaken by groups and individuals from a variety of different perspectives. The concept is inextricably linked to questions such as *who am I?* In 'attempting to answer these questions, an individual crafts a self-narrative by drawing on cultural resources as well as memories and desires to reproduce or transform their sense of self' (Alvesson et al., 2008, 15). Identity therefore is not something that a person *has* but rather something that a person *does* (Jenkins, 2008) with the self being viewed as a continuous process that is regulated, negotiated and accepted in interaction with others and in self-reflection (Cresswell, 2011). The fragile self has to be constantly and continuously remade. What we want to stress in this is the importance of being visible, of understanding that this is a performance for an imagined or real audience (Goffman 1990). If identity is derived from what humans do in interaction with others, then these actions need to be *recognised* by these others in order to matter. As Brighenti (2007, 327) puts it '[s]haping and managing visibility is a huge work that human beings do tirelessly'. Research focuses on the way that people craft, preserve and continuously modify a set of narratives about who they are and how they came to be. The self, therefore, is constructed in an ongoing process of

explanations and justifications as people construct accounts to make sense of themselves and their actions.

Most recently, any emphasis on a consistent and coherent self has come under considerable criticism by post-structuralists who argue for a multiplicity of selves and identities that are subject to different discourses. In this sense there is no 'ideal self'. Instead, the self is viewed as always 'in process', fluid and unstable (Gergen, 1999). For example, researchers have stressed the unstable nature of identities, arguing that their temporary coherence is conditional on multiple factors, many of which are contradictory (Linstead *et al* 2008). Such tensions, it is argued, are increasingly prevalent in modern organizations. Individuals, particularly those occupying managerial or professional positions, are required to respond to changing circumstances by adopting personas deemed organizationally appropriate (Watson, 2008). These 'obligatory' identities may conflict with others that individuals assume, or desire, in their work or other parts of their lives. So while individuals face multiple pressures, it is not assumed that they passively accept their demands. Instead the creation of identity is on-going and always incomplete.

These ideas are developed in numerous studies which have explored the ways in which people 'make something of themselves by enrolling and appropriating discursive resources that "fill them up" as subject' (Fournier, 2002, 58). This might be the production of a conformist self through the pursuit of an institutionally or professionally defined career (Grey, 1994), as well as more radical improvisations to shape a favourable 'impression' of oneself (Collinson 2003, Kozinets, 2002). Crucially for the argument in this paper, even the individual who seeks detachment from their organizational role and tries to preserve a separation between public and private selves must also recognise their interdependence. As Žižek (1989, 32) puts it, 'even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them'. For instance, Fleming and Spicer's (2003) imaginary cynical McDonalds worker who wears a 'McShit' tee-shirt invisibly under her uniform in an attempt to dis-identify herself from the organization's values, yet still performs as an efficient member of her team, demonstrates how even dissent becomes a form of entrapment. In another organizational example, Willmott (1993) uses Kunda's (1992) study of an IT company to illustrate what he calls 'the Dynamics of Entrapment'. This company has a culture which appears to encourage openness and freedom of expression so that employees can retain a sense of independence and control. Here a cynical attitude is not viewed as an organisational 'defect' that has to be suppressed and/or corrected, rather it is encouraged through ritualizing practices of dissent which create a 'free space' of harmless opposition where expressions of resistance are contained. This tolerance (if not encouragement) of a seemingly open opposition to corporate values, paradoxically further strengthens employees' compliance to management control. Whatever form of cynical distance or 'dis-identification' is espoused or manifested, it seems inevitable that the employee is irrefutably present and liable to be identified in ways that supplement what might be considered to be a preferred or 'real' identity. In this sense, the excessive visibility of employees' opposition to managerial demands demonstrates the success of corporate power relations, rather than their failure. It seems that the very legibility as 'dissenting' means that a visible place has been constructed for the display and registering of a particular sort of identity. As Foucault suggested, in the disciplinary society, 'visibility is a trap' (1991, 200); and the example of the panopticon strongly suggests that awareness of visibility is quite enough to encourage self-regulation of behaviour.

What becomes clear from this short review is that some very varied ideas about identity in the human sciences are very often commonly entangled with notions of visibility or, to put it another way, the process of *recognition*. For example, Axel Honneth's (1995; 2003) arguments concerning the centrality of intersubjective recognition are central to his influential attempt to formulate a post-Habermasian version of critical theory combined with developmental psychology. Charles Taylor makes similar points, though from a communitarian viewpoint which is critical of a liberalism of individuals, when he describes recognition as a 'vital human need' (1992, 26). For Honneth and Taylor, we think that there is a deep-rooted assumption that misrecognition and non-recognition are pathologies which emancipation will eradicate because visibility means being seen, being heard. Invisibility is a problem, and needs to be addressed. We understand the power of this call, and are not attempting to suggest that strategies to gain visibility are always flawed, but in this paper wish to explore the possibility of escape from the Foucauldian trap. Indeed, for critical psychologists, the very notion of 'identity' is itself a discourse which produces particular accounts, and which might be better understood as a social script (Shotter and Gergen 1989), or replaced with a concept like 'subjectivity', which might allow for the evasion of constraining taxonomies (Blackman *et al* 2008). It seems to us that it is not enough to reduce invisibility to yet another identity, confirming the hegemonic identity of the concept of identity and the logic of the same.

We think there has been comparatively little examination of the potentially positive implications of invisible social identities and the situations and processes by which they are manifested and occasionally sought. If they are considered at all, they are often considered in relation to 'hidden' stigmatised identities (for example, sexual orientation or asymptomatic illness) which require the holder to decide whether, when and how to reveal them, or to devise 'passing' behaviours that enable them keep that aspect of their identity private (Garfinkel 1967, Clair *et al* 2005, DeJordy 2008, Ragins 2008). Invisibility is also frequently used to index the 'suffered' states of social marginalisation. Altogether less consideration has been given to the processes where individuals, faced with the trap of visibility, respond by trying to make themselves unidentifiable and unremarkable, by refusing the demand to be somebody. If visibility might be disempowering, does it follow that invisibility can empower?

## **Making Invisibility Visible**

Most of us have at some point longed to be invisible, perhaps to violate the privacy of others or to escape some embarrassing predicament. Any suggestion of the pursuit of invisibility as a product of moral principle has first to contend with its frequent treatment as offering the realisation of voyeuristic desire. To be freed from identification, from being seen, is to be presented with particularly seductive possibilities. Unsurprisingly, the readers of fables are usually reminded that no good follows the acquisition of invisibility. For example, in *The Republic* Plato's Glaucon tells of the discovery of a magical ring by Gyges of Lydia, a shepherd. The ring bestows the power of invisibility on the wearer and discovering this power Gyges, in short order, inveigles himself into the royal palace, seduces the queen, murders the king and claims the throne. This is a morality tale about the limitations of individual virtue, and it offers the same lesson as the Panopticon. Being freed from identification, from a visual identity, relieves the shepherd of any moral inhibition. It leads Glaucon to question whether anyone can be so virtuous as to resist the temptations offered by the power of invisibility.

It was H.G. Wells who produced the most influential modern use of invisibility as a fable. In his 1897 novel the *The Invisible Man*, an albino scientist called Griffin discovers a potion that alters the refractive index of objects so that they become invisible. After one failed experiment with a cat, Griffin consumes the formula himself. But his initial pleasure in invisibility quickly wears off and he is forced to confront the absurdities of his condition; required to cover his whole body to 'hide' his condition or suffer nudity in the middle of winter to exploit his new power. Griffin appears to be insane, and eventually announces his intention to terrorise the nation as the invisible man. But unlike later film adaptations, it is not established whether his insanity and megalomania is a result of his condition, a side effect of the potion or a pre-existing psychosis. What is clear is that invisibility is a state ill-suited to a good life.

In general it seems that actual invisibility is a morally undesirable state in which to find oneself and the 'victim' suffers only indignity as a result (Honneth 2003). Metaphorical treatments of the condition invoke similar sentiments. In 1952, Ralph Ellison used the idea to symbolise the alienation suffered as a result of racial discrimination. Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* recounts his life holed up in the basement of a whites only building in 1930s New York and reflects on his social and political invisibility. Invisibility in this context evokes a condition faced by a group forced to submit to the values and norms of the powerful group whilst being torn from its own cultures and traditions. These are individuals whose identity is denied by the dominant actors in society and whose situation is ignored as they are pushed into the margins of life; as the book begins, 'I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me' (Ellison, 2001, 7).

Indeed, for many who seek to bring their cause to the attention of a broader audience, 'making visible' is central to their purpose and tactics. Many pressure groups – such as Greenpeace, Gay Pride, Occupy, or the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, strive to express themselves through 'celebratory direct action', or 'creative action' (Starr, 2000, 67, Harrabye 2015) in ways that demand public attention. Those who perceive that they lack prominence and presence or are endowed with a marginal identity they wish to contest, engage in a competition of signs. By creating visual impact in the media landscape such groups have produced a number of concept driven spectacles (Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2004). These forms of protest require considerable creativity, to the extent that in some cases striving for visual impact becomes a driving force.

It is clear enough that ideas about visibility and invisibility are concerned with relations of politics, power and perception (Brighenti, 2007). If to be invisible is often understood as being powerless and marginalised, then some political action therefore seeks to expose the processes through which invisibility has occurred and to force others to recognise what has gone unseen or ignored. For example, Vázquez (2009) argues that the Zapatista movement uses the symbolism of invisibility to expose their subjugation by colonial powers, sometimes withdrawing into the Lacandon Jungle for long periods. For Zapatismo, the wearing of the balaclava symbolises their marginalisation and their tactics '[w]e are without face, without word, without voice' (Vázquez, 2009, n.p.). Their fight is to attain visibility, for without visibility, the 'invisibility is tantamount to de-politicization' (Vázquez, 2009, n.p.). Of course it might be that the use of the balaclava symbolises everyone, not any particular person, or

simply demonstrates a practical refusal to be identified (like a superhero or bank robber), but whichever interpretation is preferred, what is stake here is the politics of visibility to power. Similarly, in the context of the workplace, Simpson and Lewis (2005) and Donaghey *et al* (2011) show how silence can itself be a powerful political statement, a refusal of the way in which management frame a question, and demand certain sorts of accounts. The sorts of consultation exercises, dialogues and 'conversations' which modern management often demands from its workforce are often enough refused, because employees understand the dangers of being noticed and the importance of 'keeping your head down' (so that power can't see your face). Low participation rates in surveys of staff morale can themselves send messages to management.

These limited examples show that there are different ways in which a politics of visibility and invisibility can be articulated. The idea of (in)visibility is here being used in different ways to symbolise the societal experiences of particular groups or individuals. That those who are disadvantaged frequently consider themselves to be 'invisible' captures the idea of being pushed from view and ignored. Some challenge this state by adopting strategies explicitly designed to make themselves more visible, more recognisable perhaps by marching in support of a spectacular politics, 'we're here, we're queer, get used to it'. Others, like the Zapatista, might embrace invisibility in order to topicalise it and thereby voice a demand for a different form of social order. But rather than seeing invisibility as a suffered state and visibility as a desired end for political action, we want to begin to show how a form of invisibility might be understood as a principled choice designed to challenge or reject the unwanted constraints of modern life. Earlier we outlined how there are many different understandings of our strivings to 'substantiate our subjectivity' (Fournier, 2002, 58). In particular, the identities provided by modern institutions are important providers of the materials we use to establish our place in the world. We also noted how these efforts, even if they are driven by a desire to dis-identify or oppose, trap us through the very visibility of the identities that are created. What then is the possibility for freedom derived from more radical withdrawals which try to reject the optics through which identity is made visible?

### **Escaping, Hiding, Withdrawing**

In *Escape Routes*, Papadopoulos *et al* provide examples of how the idea of escape challenges the sovereignty of power. From the vagabonds of the feudal era to post liberal precarious workers, they argue that such escapes from the public gaze 'changes our understanding of social conflicts and their biopolitical regulation' (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2008, 55). Instead of considering escape as a passive or irresponsible way to deal with social tension, Papadopoulos *et al.* (2008, 56) insist that it 'brings us to the heart of social conflict'. For example, they offer an account of Gillian Rose and her writings following her diagnosis of cancer. Rose refused to accept the representational practices of her illness which positioned her as victim and patient. Rejecting the medical normalisation of her condition therefore can be seen as an attempt to 'break out from this fastidious construction of the subject and to dissolve the spectacle's domination through representation' (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2008, 57). Similarly to Callon and Rabeharisoa's (2003) account of the refusals of the patient 'Gino' to subject themselves to treatment escape here does not connote denial or even dis-identification, but rather a rejection of being recognised only through the prevailing 'ways of seeing'. This was a principled decision that Rose and Gino chose to make; preferring imperceptibility on their own terms to visibility on the terms provided by medicine and therapy. The 'patient' refused to be seen in the way that others wanted to see them.

Withdrawal, a refusal to see and be seen, has a long history. Eremitic or reclusive monks and nuns long pursued an ascetic existence in devoting themselves to God. This has involved varying degrees of separation from society. In the anchoritic life, the devotee took up residence in a single room built against the wall of a church. Once the anchorite was inside, the clergy would brick up the entrance to the room leaving only a small gap for prayers to be heard and essentials to be exchanged. The anchorite cast off their worldly goods, status and personal relations but, as Warren (1985) notes, they were necessarily dependent on the local community for their maintenance. In this respect, the anchorite capacity for solitude remained dependent upon the people from whom they wished to remove themselves.

But unlike these monks, social withdrawal does not necessarily require dependence on prevailing social structures. On the contrary, it can be driven by moral and/or political principles which explicitly reject conventional forms of living. For example, in 2000 Daniel Suelo, a white middle class college graduate gave up his life savings to invent a new life for himself. In pursuit of what he saw to be a more authentic existence, he took up residence in caves in the canyon lands of Utah and refused to use money. In the opening pages of his book about Suelo, Sundeen (2012) is obliged to reassure the reader that Daniel is neither a drug addict nor mentally ill. Suelo practices voluntary simplicity and rejects all material possessions as trivial. His diet consists of roadkill, expired groceries from dumpsters and whatever is given to him freely by friends or strangers. He also rejects money and wage labour but often does voluntary work without any expectations of return for his effort. His choice to live as a cave dweller and his disinterest in conforming to an accepted or normalised pattern of behaviour is not driven by apathy. His choices are informed by values and longings, yet he does not affiliate with any institutionalised beliefs. His simple life is a principled choice that challenges the unwanted constraints of modern life through specific patterns of behaviour and guided by the principle to 'give freely what he has without expectation of return, and to accept without obligation that which is freely given by others' (Sundeen, 2012, 20). There is a wide spectrum of people like Suelo who practice voluntary simplicity, freeganism, scrounging and sharing either alone or within small groups (Barnard, 2011; Pentina and Amos, 2011; McDonald, 2014). Not all of these practices are as hermetic as Suelo, but they involve elements of withdrawal from the times and spaces which offer conventional visibilities. These are practices, and forms of organizing, which might be understood to be marginal, but this absence from the centre of things offers a spatial metaphor for a different way of thinking about the 'edges' of conventional social life.

These examples begin to offer a contrast with Goffman's dramaturgical self where, as agents, people are described as performing in certain ways in anticipation of an audience. Yet the idea of someone building their own shack in the middle of some woods, and eating what they grow there, suggests that there might be some forms of life which are not predicated on visibility or a particular desire for the 'recognition' that comes from being seen. But at the same time, it is important to remember that withdrawals of this kind require social sensitivity. The creation and management of the boundaries that produce separation requires an appreciation of their demands. These withdrawals might best be understood as choices derived from an individual's decision to orient themselves towards the world in a particular way and by taking actions that embody their personal order of values and meanings. Through such removal they also absent themselves from forms of control that they may be subject to, or which they may wield over others (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). This suggests that withdrawal, the pursuit and attainment of invisibility or imperceptibility, is not necessarily a lack, not always something that happens as the result of the loss or absence of other more desired states.

Like Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, in his 1853 short story 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', such action might be manifested as a refusal to engage. Bartleby's endless reiteration to his employer of the mild phrase 'I would prefer not to' eventually drifts into a complete inaction, and finally imprisonment and starvation. Bartleby never stated his resistance loudly, never announced his dissent, and his quiet insistence leaves a sense that he had even refused the conventional terms of refusal (Beverungen and Dunne, 2007). The scrivener, Melville's narrator tells us, was 'one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable', and his bafflement at Bartleby's invisibility is clear. The story offers no solution, no key to explain this life without attachments or explanations.

This is not something that is readily accepted. As we have argued, individuals are normally positively recognised if they broadly conform to particular accepted or normalised patterns of behaviour. Individuals whose behaviours or lifestyle does not easily suit this frame of reference – outsiders, criminals and deviants - must be reconfigured to meet the prevailing norms and/or interpreted as the consequence of the loss of, or inability to attain, more desirable and virtuous states (Becker 1963). It is difficult to 'see' ways of living that challenge conventional ideas about what it means to be someone, to be legible to others within a given social context. As the story of Paul Auster's father suggests, it is even harder to understand in the context of a 'normal' life where an individual has achieved invisibility within, rather than outside, everyday work and society<sup>3</sup>. Markers of community and conventional modes of engagement are frequently written into the life's post-mortem, whether the individual likes it or not.

Tonkiss (2003) offers a vignette of a life which illustrates this. Kathy Nguyen was a 61 year old Vietnamese immigrant who died as a result of the anthrax attacks in the US in 2001. She arrived from Vietnam in 1975, was divorced, her son had died in a car accident and she had occupied the same address for 21 years. She seems to have lived an entirely anonymous life. However the fact of her death required that the media re-imagined forms of community around her life, accounts which inevitably prove contradictory. So for some, the absence of ethnic ties was a symbol of loneliness; it 'was a peculiarly un-Vietnamese life- no other aunties, no kids running around, no men to smoke and drink beer and tell war stories; no men, ultimately to protect her' (Wenger, 2001, 7, cited in Tonkiss 2003, 306). For others, there is the opportunity to create a shared community of ethnic diversity, 'only in America could a Vietnamese woman learn to eat rice and beans and her Puerto Rican neighbours learn to eat Vietnamese' (Guillermo, 2001, cited in Tonkiss 2003, 306).

Nguyen's relatively anonymous life jarred with her exceptional death. Brought to the media's attention by tragic bad fortune, her existence had to be retrospectively installed with meaning through connection. Communities were imagined, named and provided with a role in the life of the deceased. Seemingly there is an aversion to accept solitude and concomitant social invisibility except to signal dysfunction or neglect, an image of Eleanor Rigby's funeral<sup>4</sup>, attended by no-one. Coleman (2009) proposes that loneliness has always been viewed with suspicion by sociologists. This, he suggests, follows from the emphasis within the discipline on solidarity, community and collectivity and in which solitude is equated with Durkheimian anomie, even within the city's 'lonely crowd' (Riesman 1950). Similarly within psychology, individuals exhibiting a preference for solitude or an attitude of shyness are seen to be displaying symptoms of 'psychological deficiencies' (McCutcheon et al., 2004, 499). And yet, there is nothing in what was known of Nguyen's life to suggest an unfulfilled longing for association that represented a failure of community. It may have been

an undesired state of victimhood that resulted from the accumulation of loss and disregard. This is possible. But it is just as possible that this was a life sought; that Nguyen relished the freedom from demands of friends, family and that she found that the passing connections of city neighbours and work associates offered a comfortable balance of distance and connection<sup>5</sup>. Solitude might have been pursued, more likely it gradually accumulated as a particular life unfolded. But such a possibility should not be discounted..

The difficulties with representing a life so led are the consequence of a preoccupation with societal forms that have been assigned the dominant repository of meaning and virtue – work, community, family. Indeed in UK politics, all politicians appear to be using the term 'hard working families' synonymously with 'electorate'. This is despite the fact that demographic changes across the global north mean that the numbers of people living alone continue to rise. Riley (2002, 9) suggests that 'there's a stronger solitude that refuses to be understood as merely presocial and rejects the benevolent will to make everything (...) familial. This solitude groans at the prospect of being tenderly ushered into the domain of the new social'. To be socially recognised is to be seen by the state, and 'tabulated, monitored and regulated' (*op cit*, 8). Again, visibility forms a trap, a straitjacket which discourages certain kinds of action. In her discussion of life in the city, Tonkiss attempts to value particular forms of existence which are both enabled and required by the urban environment. Cities are often places where differences are unremarkable and therefore where indifference to strangers produces certain rights and protections. An indifferent reaction to difference, or 'looking past the face', is considered to be 'both insuring against and an acceptance of difference' (Tonkiss, 2003, 301)<sup>6</sup>. Indifference is a relation between subjects that exists not in face-to-face relations of community, but rather side-by-side relations of anonymity. Rather than actively recognising difference this is an 'everyday ethics that looks straight past it'. Such an 'ethics of indifference' is the capacity to be unseen and unexceptional in an environment where differences are unassimilated (Tonkiss, 2003, 299). In the following section we will explore these possibilities further. We wish to argue that the pursuit of a form of social imperceptibility, achieved by indifference to recognition, can be a principled action.

## **A Stoic Ethics of Indifference**

In our previous examples, we find individuals who are more or less indifferent to established sources of identity. Some pursue alternative forms of life 'outside' the conventional societal structures and spaces of meaning and value. Others find patterns of existence within them, dissolving into the background as a consequence of their refusal to stand out, to stand up and be counted. Our suggestion is that these examples might represent an attitude towards identity work that is usually neglected. Moreover they suggest a practical ethics for escaping the visibility trap constructed by institutionally dominated lives. We want to suggest that this ethics suggests an approach influenced by a Stoicism that warns us of the dangers of pursuing identities as safeguards against insecurity and contingency. These dangers derive from the compromises that are necessary within the institutions that produce and sustain these identities. Stoicism, it seems to us, fits rather well with some of the Deleuzian moves that we make in this paper, since it refuses any general rules about how we might live well, instead insisting that the key task is to avoid reproducing institutions and forms of thinking which configure thought and action in predictable ways<sup>7</sup>.

The Stoics<sup>8</sup> had little regard for performing identities since they believed that appropriate and moderate behaviour could only follow from a form of detachment. There are different

forms of Stoicism, a form of thought that is usually dated from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and associated with Zeno of Citium, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and others. It became popular throughout the Roman Empire, centrally associated with the idea that virtue derived from being dispassionate. However to be 'dispassionate' did not mean that a Stoic should be insensitive or unfeeling, simply that judgement should not be dictated by externally derived identifications. The Stoic philosophy therefore did not produce, or require, the stiff upper lipped suffering that is popularly depicted as its main characteristic. It does not connect meaningless with hopelessness or the impossibility of action. This is because it generally rejects only the pursuit of meaning that is conventionally sought through particular 'projects' derived from societal institutions. Instead it encouraged giving up these identifications since this allows a form of situational sensitivity that, free from the need for personal attachment and recognition, simply allows one to do what appears to need to be done. Meaning is produced by a virtuous life, and virtue results from living according to a practical assessment of available resources and requirements rather than personal or institutional demands. In this respect, the indifference of the Stoics applied only to pursuits which were motivated by unwarranted needs. To be dispassionate was simply not to place value on unimportant or trivial things, as Epictetus suggested - 'Permit nothing to cleave to you that is not your own; nothing to grow to you that may give you agony when it is torn away'. Stoicism did suggest the importance of having commitments, but believed that efforts should be always be decided specifically and not automatically derived from the common sense of others. Rationality in Stoicism required trying to understand the world before we act; our 'powers, relationships, limitations, possibilities, motives, intentions and endeavours before we deliberate about normative matters' (Becker, 1998, 33).

Stoics certainly did accept the importance of being *for* something. But these commitments were neither to be derived from personal quests or by meeting institutional demands. Making such judgements requires a combination of acceptance of contingency, a stress on self-determination and a form of situational sensitivity. This is an orientation that does not value institutional responsibilities and rejects procedural certainties in dealing with the uncertainties of life (Murphy, 1999). According to most Stoic philosophy, an authentic individual is not one who pursues purely what is necessary to manifest one's inner self and realise personal goals. Instead it is someone who is able to assess what it is worth pursuing in the situation that one finds oneself and rejects what is found to be worthless. Self-determination and resistance to institutional engagements produces a re-evaluation of the value of things. Without the drive to manifest conventional markers of identity, many attachments are rendered redundant, and many displays of identification no longer necessary. In this spirit, a Stoic might suggest that becoming imperceptible is a consequence of a set of behaviours which have to be carefully performed. Through self-determination and the meticulous navigation of external demands, the individual is able to find some release from the trap of visibility. And as many of the materials that are commonly enlisted to make us visible are rejected, or are no longer available to us, the Stoic may begin to fade away from sight, to become imperceptible.

With this in mind, returning to Ellison's *Invisible Man* it is now possible to put forward a different treatment of its central concept. We also see a pointer to another, more radical interpretation in which invisibility suggests an existential choice which connects with our concerns here. The first and most obvious treatment is an expression of the inherent and involuntary invisibility which is suffered when the black man is forced to live amongst those who refuse to recognise his humanity. The second is a form of invisibility that is produced by a refusal to engage in outward displays of conformity or rebellion, and hence to be

labelled as this or that. As Epictetus counselled, 'Keep silence for the most part, and speak only when you must, and then briefly.' It is the result of this sort of withdrawal that produces the appearance of a conformist identity, whilst protecting that which is valued. The production of a bland identity is a cloak which serves to obscure the threat that others may perceive. As the literary critic Todd Lieber (1972) suggests, it serves as the protector of something that can never be revealed lest it be destroyed, perhaps another manifestation of the 'passing behaviour' that we briefly mentioned previously.

Ellison's narrator works through these different possibilities. He realises that any creations of self or attempts to redefine identity will not affect society's inability to see the man, only some stereotype of 'a black man'. Moreover, if he succeeds in manifesting an identity that is visible, it will inevitably be seen only because it is perceived as threatening. The destruction of both the identity and the individual will surely follow if there is a 'conscious adoption of a false identity' (Lieber, 1972, 87). Perhaps worse, even if successful and precisely because it is successful, a mask of protection may overcome the desired identity that it was meant to preserve. It is simply a tactic towards power; a submission to bad faith. The narrator therefore rejects the wearing of a mask as inimical to the 'vital' identity which might be won from the existential choice that every person has to define their own world. By the end of the novel, invisibility is reconfigured as a statement of the human condition since visibility or legibility is only produced when identity confirms an image held by another. Ellison seems to be suggesting that invisibility might be the price of maintaining an authentic identity, the secret within that should never be exposed to the public glare.

### **Becoming Imperceptible**

This Stoic reading of Ellison is a very individualised one, giving the actor the power to appear or disappear. In terming this 'choice', as we have, rather than the result of certain social relations, we want to restore some sense of dignity and reason to this particular action. We do not think that practices of imperceptibility are always evidence of victimhood or powerlessness, but can sometimes be evidence of the pursuit of space. The Stoics would never assume that the powers of the world can be dissolved by intentional decisions, but they would stress the importance of orientations to the world in framing responses to it. However, there are also some other ways in which a more social or relational version of invisibility might be put forward. We do recognise that there are two very different registers at work here. One is an account of social actors making choices about how to understand their relationship to the world, whilst the other is a structural (or post-structural) account of the relationship between certain populations and certain powers. So when Deleuze and Guattari write of 'becoming imperceptible', using literary sources such as Richard Matheson's novel *The Shrinking Man* and Paul Morand's *Monsieur Zero*, it is understood as a question of relative speeds, not a chosen state of being (2004: 308).

Compare this to Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor's version of escape from what they called the 'open prison' of 'paramount reality' in their book *Escape Attempts* (1975) which reflected a general understanding within the 'new criminology' that what counted as deviance was not immanent in an act but depended on social context. More recently, and as already mentioned, Papadopoulos *et al* (2008) have explored the meaning of escape as a collective exodus from the spaces of the state, the labour market, of classifications of someone as this or that. Taylor and Cohen's version of escape often seems more like individual escapism, a person dreaming of being elsewhere, but Papadopoulos *et al* formulate a version of resistance which is a collective refusal to be made visible by institutions. This more social

sense of withdrawal suggests that what is at stake in questions of visibility is not only the ability for an individual to make choices, but also as a way of understanding why the silence of the majority does not mean assent (Baudrillard 1983). The anthropologist James Scott, in several books but most famously in *Seeing Like a State*, has argued that institutions produce visibility through a wide variety of techniques - maps, taxes, official transcripts, naming and so on (1998, see also 1985, 1990). However, states (or any institutions) only see certain things, and so other forms of politics and resistance become invisible.

Scott's early accounts of 'infapolitics', and of what he calls 'the hidden transcript', begin with ethnographic accounts of Vietnamese and Malay peasants, perhaps women like Kathy Nguyen, and their deliberate attempts to remain invisible to the state. His later work generalises these ideas and shows how subordinate groups of many different kinds resist through indirect and covert means. Institutions, Scott says, attempt to make their subjects legible, comprehensible to certain forms of surveillance and governance. It means tidying up forests, populations and cities, in an attempt to manufacture uniformity and standardization. A consequence of this is that resistance often also becomes legible too, because it can be seen as spectacle, counted, and countered. Scott is interested in the ways in which what he calls 'the weapons of the weak' are disguised as stories, jokes, or silence. A bowed head, quiet smile, or evasion of eye contact might signify compliance to the powerful, but that is because under conditions which are structured by power, sustained resistance must often not be seen.

Some of Scott's (2011) ideas have been applied within the context of queer theory by Judith Halberstam, who combines his work with that of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to develop an account of knowledge which celebrates secrets, the underground and forms of 'low theory'. This means attempting to explore and produce 'illegibility', because for Scott 'legibility is a condition of manipulation' (1998, 183). Foucault's interest in 'subjugated knowledges', post-colonial theory's accounts of 'subaltern knowledge' and queer theory's fascination with the outsider come together in Halberstam's concern with 'failure, loss and unbecoming' (2011, 7). These are not conditions forced upon the abject, not a failure to be recognised in Honneth's terms, but a choice not to be complicit in the production of the same. Failure is one of Scott's 'weapons of the weak'.

'The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being' (Halberstam, 2011, 88)

The question of who defines failure is at issue here, as it has been all through this essay. For many thinkers who are generally classified as post-structuralists, a refusal of the dominant modes of understanding and judgement is the epistemological politics that drives their work. Becoming invisible could certainly be defined as a personal ethical question, as it might be for someone who adopted a Stoic philosophy for example, but it can also be understood as a political question which can have strategic benefits for those groups who choose to cloak themselves. This is not to suggest that 'ethics' and 'politics' are clearly bounded, one applying to the individual and another to the collective, but they are certainly different ways of thinking about the relation between people and values. So whether articulated as a personal choice, or part of a collective struggle, invisibility matters. It can be a position in a system of power, a relation which can confer imperceptibility, depending on perspective (Parker 2015). As Judith Butler phrases it -

‘There are advantages to remaining less than intelligible, if intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms. Indeed, if my options are loathsome, if I have no desire to be recognised within a certain set of norms, then it follows that my sense of survival depends on escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred.’ (2004, 3)

The negative versions of words like failure, withdrawal, and illegibility are here potentially reconfigured into a form of escape, an exodus from a world of identities and identifications which endlessly produce the claustrophobia of the same. Becoming invisible, keeping silent, staying incomprehensible and anonymous are all strategies which quietly refuse, which say ‘I would prefer not to’ to a world which demands so much. In this way, practices of imperceptibility might be understood as the pursuit of space from the endless demand to say who you are.

## **Conclusion**

‘... it’s not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don’t stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves; What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying.’ (Deleuze 1997: 129)

‘May you live in interesting times’ is often repeated as a ‘Chinese’ curse, but there are worse curses in that apocryphal series - ‘may you come to the notice of the Emperor’, and ‘may you get that Imperial posting you crave’. Being seen, being noticed, is a powerful desire, but fulfilling it brings traps and dangers, both individual and collective. In recent work in the human sciences, ideas about identity have been central in explaining how individuals perform and maintain a self-narrative in the turbulent societies of the contemporary global north. In this speculative essay we have used a variety of literary and academic sources to point to the important, but sometimes unacknowledged, role of visibility in these discussions. We noted the importance of recognition (of being ‘seen’) and striving towards desirable roles (being ‘seen to be seen’) in identity work. We then explored the consequence of introducing an alternative motif of invisibility into these discussions. Moreover rather than always seeing invisibility as a suffered state and visibility as a desired response, as Honneth, Taylor and many social identity theorists do, we have suggested that forms of invisibility might result from a principled choice designed to challenge or reject the expectations of a particular life. In particular the pursuit or acceptance of invisibility might offer an ethically or politically informed response to the demands on individuals to respond to institutional pressures, or the collective production of a refusal to be legible to power.

We argued that forms of social invisibility can come from pursuing modes of existence or forms of knowledge that do not comfortably fit conventional organizational or societal expectations. By examining the implications of invisible social identities and how they are manifested and sometimes sought, we suggested that they can represent an individual or collective challenge to conditions of power. In this sense indifference and invisibility does not necessarily equal quietism or passivity. It is not a failure to achieve something, but rather a refusal to value and pursue identities that are primarily driven by the need for recognition, or the demand for legibility. If someone believes that the creation of identity is associated

with a loss of freedom, then perhaps unmaking ourselves, and achieving a form of invisibility, presents a possibility of escape.

This might seem like an odd argument to make at a time when so many people seem to be interested in identity, and the politics that it implies, particularly in organization studies. Much of this work suggests the uncovering of that which has not been able to speak its name, and with the amplification of voices which might speak of their difference and marginalisation. These are important ways of understanding ethics and politics, and this essay is not suggesting that the arguments that underpin them are wrong or misguided. However, we do want to insist that voice does not exhaust politics, at work or anywhere else (Donaghey *et al.*, 2011), and that silence and invisibility can be understood as political strategies too (Baudrillard 1983, Parker 2015). It is clear that identities are not just spaces of self-confident assertion, so it should not surprise us that the rejection of identification, the refusal of recognition by those who 'manage' and 'govern' us, can also be a rejection of the institutional conditions which make identities possible. To be seen sometimes means being visible in certain ways, and it means making oneself available for that visibility. That is why we cannot end this paper by recommending a research programme to explore this 'gap', or suggesting appropriate methods to access 'hard to reach' subjects. The writing of this essay, in this way, is an example of this problem, when perhaps silence would have been a better response than the patter of a keyboard.

There are also some clear paradoxes in this essay. We have suggested that invisibility can be chosen, at the same time as we have suggested that it is a relation produced by a particular configuration of power. We have also proposed that one way that invisibility might be chosen is by avoiding institutional entanglements, yet proposed that following the (very long established) philosophy of the Stoics is a way to achieve this. Finally, we have suggested that identity is a trap, but then explored a variety of ways in which invisibility might itself become a form of identity. This is another example of the paradoxes which we are continually courting here, in that any claim to withdrawal can always be made a claim about a different form of connection<sup>9</sup>. But just because 'a hermit' requires language and other hermits to become comprehensible doesn't mean (we think) that the impulse to withdraw, to become invisible, can always be explained as the adoption of an already existing social identity. This is to make the logic of sameness over-ride an attempt to construct interpretations which stress difference. It seems that the terms of the arguments we have made here are themselves compromised by the language that we use, almost as if there is a performative contradiction in the task we are attempting<sup>10</sup>. The incitement to speak, to connect, to explain seems to refuse to allow disconnection, and instead draw understanding back to the lens of identity, with its assumptions about perceptibility and legibility. Perhaps this is not surprising, in a paper that tries to make invisibility visible, to interpret that which attempts not to speak.

To end where we began, Sam Auster was a white, middle class male who was relatively well blessed with opportunities to make something of his life. Curiously, he took none of them and his unyielding indifference meant he lacked presence. He had become invisible, imperceptible, illegible. Although Sam's behaviour may, in the last, be nothing to be admired, in turning away from what was expected he challenges us with questions of purpose and being. And sometimes there are situations where invisibility is a principled and practical response to unconscionable demands. That it precludes recognition might be the necessary price to be paid.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the editor and referees of this journal for their very helpful comments on two earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Readings which are, of course, ours, and should not be assumed to be based on some idea that meanings are immanent in texts, or float transcendently above them either.

<sup>3</sup> See also Halberstam's (2011, 131) commentary on Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of my Mother*, or John Williams' novel *Stoner*, as further examples of this theme in literature.

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the 1966 song about 'all the lonely people' by the Beatles.

<sup>5</sup> We note Kathy's gender at this point. Whilst this paper isn't foregrounding gender, it clearly intersects with questions of visibility in some complex ways, as does her age, and her ethnicity. Recognising the masculine gaze is important here, and the way that women can become hyper-visible, or imperceptible, has a relation to that gaze..

<sup>6</sup> See also Georg Simmel's musings on the stranger and the metropolis and mental life (Frisby and Featherstone 1997).

<sup>7</sup> As one of our referees suggested, Stoicism and Deluzian Vitalism are both alternatives to 'arboreal' Aristotelian Rationalism.

<sup>8</sup> An attitude to the world, and its attachments, that we also find in other spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism for example.

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<sup>9</sup> As one of our referees noted, our interpretation of Daniel Suelo disregards the various ways in which radical ecologists, particularly in the US 'West', have developed their own counter culture within which Sundeen's account can be framed. See, for example, Edward Abby's 1975 novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

<sup>10</sup> See, as an example of this paradox, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's 'Museum of Non-Participation', <http://www.museumofnonparticipation.org/acts.php?sb=dt>