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# Lights out: practicing opacity in Estonian basements

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*Francisco Martínez*

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This essay engages with alternative regimes of invisibility by investigating the things that are kept, and the practices that take place in basements of eastern Estonia. The use of hiding infrastructures is here taken as part of wider claims about epistemic disobedience and resistance of any social control over our interiority. Ethnographic descriptions show the way placing things underground is an enactment of inattention at the intersection between different forms of value, temporality, and representation. The right to opacity is thus presented as a way of resisting the hegemonic terms of engagement, preserving diversity against the central modern gaze that constantly demands clarity and accountability.

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“The opaque is not the obscure... it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence”

Édouard Glissant (*Poetics of Relation*, 1997)

BASEMENTS ARE SPACES OF TRANSITION, AN INTERSECTION WHERE everything ends and begins anew.<sup>1</sup> Mobilized to conceal, basements contribute to regulate the amount of intimacy to be displayed upstairs, allowing a complex negotiation with the hegemonic system of permission and prohibition. That’s why they require invitation and are marked by a brink that not everyone can succeed in crossing – doing so might generate a feeling of intrusion. As spaces that allow a reversed order, basements appear to visitors as equally mysterious and intimidating.



Figure 1 – Dmitri Fedotkin opening his basement in Narva. Source: Francisco Martínez, 2022.

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By paying attention to how basements make room for alternative orders of value and regimes of visibility, we will re-read the postcolonial notion of “opacity” in the context of contemporary problems of exposition, transparency and attention. As posed by Édouard Glissant (1997), the “right to opacity” consists in letting things be in their otherness. In this vein, I claim the right to not be transparent and to not always make sense, preserving difference while contributing to the articulation of symbolic and material order.



For over four years, Anna Škodenko, Darja Popolitova, Viktor Gurov and myself have been conducting research in the basements of eastern Estonia investigating which things are kept and which practices take place therein.<sup>2</sup> Basements are not just passive containers, but technologies of the meantime; hiding places provide a dis-connection, allowing things, people and also non-human creatures to disappear (in a more or less durable way) while remaining linked.

Indeed, the earliest studio and the first museum happened in caves, carnivalesque spaces *par excellence*. The underground has been a hotbed for myths and stories for millennia, while the authorities recurrently attempt to remove or transform those dark corners into spaces of light.

There is something liminal about basements, allowing extra-territorial rites of initiation and stories to be invented while blurring the prevailing dichotomy between public and private (as noted by Patrick Lavolette in his response to this essay). The entryway is a liminal space, not unlike the symbolic border trespassed in hitchhiking while hopping into a stranger’s car. First of all because descending the stairs into a basement requires an invitation; secondly, because a space of trust and intimacy is automatically created; thirdly, because of the transformational potential of the experience (Lavolette 2021).

Basements materialize the possibility of a surplus of practices and interpretations. In doing so, they allow people to perform a hybrid identity and cope with the changing boundaries of our private space and the invention of new forms of “intrusion” and ways of “policing” them.

For example, in the 90’s, Dima’s storage booth in Sillamäe operated as a meeting point for friends. Then, he was younger and still living with his parents, so the *sarai* was the place where he chatted and eventually drank with his mates. Also, Alexei tells us about hanging out with his friends in “Disco 5”, a clandestine bar opened in 1992 in an unfinished bunker. Perhaps, these young people did not have “a room of one’s own” and 500 pounds (*à la* Woolf), but they found a corner of freedom and camaraderie in basements. There, they

2 The result is a four-artist installation, first exhibited in the show “Decolonial Ecologies” (Riga Art Space, 2022).

could tinker with language, visuals and materials, testing, exploring, and experiencing things with a less consequential nature, as in a laboratory.

Entering a basement requires a particular choreography, a slowing down of our pace so as to not fall or break something. Then you encounter a damp feeling, the smell of the underground, a darker interior. Not everything here has straightforward meaning either; one needs another form of attention to access what silently exists incognito and, eventually, mirrors the invisible. What goes on in a basement stands on the limits of knowing. Shadow areas such as basements can nonetheless be entered ethnographically, thereby gaining knowledge that is available only to insiders, or exploring the reversed side of relations. However, to practice research in the dark might challenge our believed ability to see knowledge, since it breaks down the anthropological method of participant observation. Therefore, in their responses, Hermione Spriggs and Mariana Tello Weiss foreground the alternative modes of attention that the invisible demands and develop a critique of homogenising forms of knowledge production.

The dualism light and darkness, as referring to knowledge and ignorance, is uneasy. Indeed, we did not meet any white rabbit beckoning us into Wonderland; reactions in the field were rather skeptical or even demeaning. For example, our posts in a series of Facebook forums, seeking access to basements, received laughing emojis as a response and comments such as that by Anele:

“And what is interesting about the basements of Ida-Virumaa? Sorry, I don’t really understand the purpose of this project... I went to check my shed in the old town hoping to find how this could be attractive for the Riga art space”.

But there were also cases in which local residents reconsidered the value of their basement after having a stranger showing interest in their stored things. Likewise, in some cases, our research acquired a performative aspect once a resident decided to clean the basement and stage a few objects before our visit. On other occasions, such as in Narva-Jõesuu, local neighbors thought that we were robbers checking what was where in order to steal it. And there were also instances in which we found ourselves in unpleasant political discussions with the people showing us the basements.

This was the case with Vladimir, who first impelled us to notice how clean the basements were, when he asked: “Are you interested in buying real state in Sillamäe? Because I also work as a broker”. Then, Anna observed a dozen large bottles of drinking water and asked if they were for an eventual case of war, a question that led Vladimir to tell us about “the truth” in Ukraine, arguing that we, the “young people of Tallinn,” are being manipulated by Western media. “The difference,” Anna stated, “is that here you can express these opinions,

but on the other side of the border you end up in prison for doing so”. Equally, we had some disagreement with Graf, a taxi driver in Narva, also in relation to the war in Ukraine. The paradox in this case is that he was actually a French citizen, born in Lille yet relocated to Narva after getting married with a Narvian. “Who started the war? It is obvious, the country that is benefiting the most from it – America.”

Vladimir and Graf were behaving like a bad minority, remaining politically Russian and not speaking Estonian – the only national language officially accepted in the state; a conduct that does not meet the hierarchy of ethnicity in the country (Dzenovska 2018). The belief that there is more to the political reality than meets the eye has been widespread in the post-socialist world, prolonging the atmosphere of suspicion that characterized the Soviet regime through the circulation of rumours, conspiracy theories and unseen enemies (Gotfredsen 2016; Verdery 2018; Mühlfried 2021).

Since the restoring of its independence in 1991, Estonia, however, became an advanced digital society and is often presented as a success story in e-governance. This happened in parallel with extensive institutional efforts to establish a homogenous society based on a restricted understanding of the Estonian nation, in some cases contradicting the EU values regarding preservation of difference and multiculturalism in our societies.

Discourses of e-governance and e-citizenship have been an important part of the Estonian statecraft and policy (Mäe 2017; Kaljund 2018), unlocking “the entrepreneurial potential of every world citizen” (Kotka, Vargas Álvarez and Korjus 2016: 9). Nevertheless, the development of a transparent e-state and of digital entrepreneurship have failed to resolve two problems of invisibility in the country: 5,3% of the Estonian population still has an “undetermined citizenship”,<sup>3</sup> a status that complicates getting a job and does not allow to vote in national elections. Likewise, every year, nearly 4000 people go missing, of which 86 are still unaccounted for by the police.<sup>4</sup>



At the beginning, Nikolai thought I was a secret police officer. Then, he relaxed and we ended up talking about drug consumption in Narva. Nikolai also described the fights he had with his neighbor. Since the basement was

3 According to Statistics Estonia (2021), there are over 69.000 people with undetermined citizenship presently living in the country, mostly elderly people in the region of Ida-Virumaa. The government uses the category “undetermined citizenship”, instead of “noncitizens” or “stateless people”, to refer to those who were living here in 1991 but failed to pass the required exam of Estonian language. This implies that citizenship is not absent, but yet to be determined (Martínez 2018a).

4 Out of a population of 1.33 million. See the website of the Estonian police: < <https://www.politsei.ee/et/teadmata-kadunud-inimesed> > (last consulted in march 2024).

communal, and after a series of disagreements, they both went to a notary to clearly divide which square meters belong to whom. Nikolai works in construction and repair. When someone dies, he clears the apartment. Sometimes, he puts aside some of the things he finds, hoping to sell them on the internet, though most of them end up in shoeboxes placed in his basement. There, he stores dozens of old mobile phones, dozens of bills and coins, several icons, as well as a bible printed in Юрьев (nowadays Tartu) in the Estonian language. “But are you able to read Estonian?”, a question to which Nikolai simply smiles.

Eastern Estonia is a liminal territory, standing as the border of both the European Union and NATO. Because of mass migration from the Soviet Union, this is a region with a majority of ethnic Russians in a country that only has Estonian language as official. As a result, Russophone Estonians deploy an ambivalent, hybrid identity, alas they are often taken as “semi-immigrants” and internally “othered” due to their enduring cultural ties to Russia (Vetik and Helemäe 2011; Martínez 2020).

“*Ну а че еще в Силке делать?*” (“What else can we do in Silki?”), reads a *grafiti* in a former military base of the red army, located at the centre of Sillamäe. It was a closed town during the Soviet era, which could only be accessed with special permits because of an uranium enrichment plant, thus pertaining to the paranoid reasoning of the Cold War (Marcus 1999). Still, nearly half of the population holds a grey passport and has an undetermined citizenship. In the last 30 years, Sillamäe has lost almost half of its population and those remaining don’t consider themselves absolutely Russian nor Estonian, neither half-Russian half-Estonian. They are just “Sillamäeans” (Montesquiou 2006).



In this essay, I point out the necessity for some spaces to be dark and for us to engage with ambivalence and the otherness that upsets modern planning. Nevertheless, and as noted by Tamta Khalvashi in her response, peripheral spaces and underground structures do not always guarantee self-expression, creativity and adventure. In some cases, they can also be fundamentally oppressive and show awkward continuities between Soviet modernity and neoliberalism (see also Khalvashi 2019).

The defence of not-transparent spaces is in opposition to the sight and the verticality of viewers that characterize modern ideals (Woods 2008), manifested, for example, in the use of glass in architecture (Vidler 1994). For instance, Le Corbusier (1923) talked of practicing a “law of whitening” (*loi du blanchiment*) to favour purity and cleanness in our physical surroundings.

Another example of this *ethos* is the Crystal Palace in Madrid, built in 1887 to house an exhibition on the Philippines in which aborigines from the then Spanish colony were exhibited as if it were a human zoo. Multiple objects were

brought from the Philippines for this event, including straw houses, canoes, and 40 people – the women pretended to be tobacco manufacturers and weavers, while the men performed agricultural scenes. As a result, the exhibition led to a hypervisibilization of the Other in terms of the central, normalizing gaze. It combined a denial of the Filipinos' capacity to represent themselves with a state of lack of secrets.

While visibility can signal recognition and empower those who had been previously marginalized, it can also imply an erasure of difference, turning transparency into a mode of display of the powerful (Ellis 2022). Hence, transparency does not simply show reality, but also participates in its construction. In its aim to eradicate the domain of suspicion and “indigenous” irrationality while making everything readable and measurable within the model of master knowledge (Taussig 2020), transparency ends up scorching alternative forms of temporality and otherwise ways of knowing.

Discourses of and designs for transparency, which were originally supposed to hold public officials accountable, might also become a tool by the majority to erase differences, impose their agenda, and impede the possibility of alternative collective bonds and ways of life to emerge. Thus, transparency is not just a process and an outcome of modernity, but also a veil for the operations of power (West and Sanders 2003). Politics in practice revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it; hence, around who has the ability to speak and when this activity is performed (Rancière 2004). However, we often hear that transparency is a solution to all kinds of problems (Birchall 2014), an apolitical form of administration that can always be improved by experts (Sharma 2013).

Likewise, transparency is wrapped up in beliefs about the superior function of markets and digital networks that objectively measure social relations (Strathern 2000). In doing so, transparency is translated into quotidian acts of “knowing”, carried out by all sorts of administrators and cultural producers. It is in that context that opacity comes out as both a form of resistance and a side-effect of the ordering obsession of modernity. In the first case, opacity is practiced as a medium that resists the light of Western epistemology, while acknowledging the value of knowledges that have been rendered as residual or not relevant (Crowley 2006; Mignolo 2011). In the second case, opacity emerges along with ambivalence, as the waste-product of our incessant attempt to create meaning and maintain the world categorized (Bauman 1991).



Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) suggested that myths are important because they exemplify the way communities think. Following this logic, we can speculate that what we hide is important precisely because it exemplifies the way people

do not want to think though they still do. What we want to hide also makes us who we are. Overall, the gesture of keeping things in the dark plays an important role in the iterative ordering and adjustment of personal identity, family relations, and wider political and technological transformations. Yet any given system requires some sort of boundaries and separations to maintain it operational. So, where there is a basement, there is a system.

In the basements, we encountered a thick accumulation of layers and traces of living, instead of the clean historical representation arranged by the national state. For example, Irina reports feeling “ashamed” when throwing things away, but she also comments that she doesn’t want to pay to get rid of things. Then, when pointing at a bulky Soviet cupboard, she conceals being unable to throw it away successfully, explaining that she would need to hire someone “to take it out from here and to transport it somewhere else”. In some other cases, it was hard for tenants to throw things away without some transition that allows revaluation or temporal gap, which was provided by keeping things underground.

In our art installation, we included a brown leather bag used by Irina’s parents when on vacation in the Black Sea decades ago. She lives in Narva-Jõesuu, a town that was part of that map of holiday destinations that Soviet workers could enjoy. We also displayed an orthodox icon given to Irina 30 years ago. On the way out, she told us to hide the icon inside the bag so that no one notices she has given it away. Secrecy is a cultural practice in everyday life, something that everybody knows, somehow, but agrees not to talk about (Taussig 1999). We are referring to the production of non-knowledge, what Georg Simmel conceptualized as *Nichtwissen* (1906).

Basements, as a technology that protects, shelters and masks (Newell 2018), contribute to form a secretive kind of relations. They are grey zones at the margins of meaning and at the limits of knowledge (Frederiksen and Knudsen 2015). This argument, nonetheless, does not put the existence of knowledge in question, but rather raises awareness of the multitude of knowledge repertoires and regimes of (in)visibility that we encounter in everyday interactions. Following this thread, we can relate what exists in the dark with an ethnographic not-yet that cannot be fully understood (Glissant 1997; Martínez, Di Puppò and Frederiksen 2021), and approach basements as places that lean towards obscurity and where explanation as such holds limited value (Espírito Santo, Murray and Salinas 2023).



In another instance, I carried out an artistic performance to reflect about the way digital technologies transform the temporality of doing ethnographic research (Martínez 2018b). The experimental *mise-en-scène* consisted

in installing myself at a café in Lisbon and Tbilisi for 35 hours beyond the reach of smartphones and laptops and then do nothing. The meaning of doing nothing is indeed ambivalent: it can be understood as a form of inactivity and stillness, but also as a public performance of lack of purpose (Nafus 2008). During this exercise, time slowed, I experienced boredom and also the anxiety of being disconnected and of exposing myself in a semi-public space, seeing while been seen simultaneously.

I took doing “nothing” as an epistemological and ontological form of interaction that reveals a series of problems of exposition and attention. It was like hiding in plain sight, something like enacting Wally, a comic personage wearing a red and white striped shirt that has to be found by the readers within a crowd of people.<sup>5</sup> Or like the main character of *The Invisible Man*, by H.G. Wells (1983 [1897]), who achieves invisibility through a science experiment, making then possible different forms of relating. There is another *Invisible Man* (1952), written by Ralph Ellison. It tells the story of a nameless black man, invisible because people refuse to see him, becoming a phantom in other people’s minds. The invisibility of this young Afro-American is due to the “poor vision” of those with whom he comes in contact. This socio-political allegory ends, however, with the man hiding out underground, occupying the basement not as a form of exception but as a way of survival. The novel has, nonetheless, an existential tone that reminds of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1994 [1864]). It is told through the monologue of an isolated man who tries to answer the question “who am I?” by engaging with obscure practices led by irrational human drives.

Slowing down is a condition of possibility for the emergence and recognition of both difference and indifference (Stengers 2005). It allows us to retrain our social experience of time (Bear 2016), while trying to build a more resourceful attitude to exposure and attention. It seems that there are things that we can only train away from a screen. As in, for instance, training oneself in slowness and inattention. The lack of technological mediacy helped my work of noticing, and triggered unexpected reflections about how I am noticed, since doing nothing made me available differently to those who surrounded me. This approach goes well with the idea of cultivating or enriching time, as it also happens in the basements, where other forms of value evolve, precisely because they are put on pause.

Alas, during the staging of doing nothing, sometimes I felt that I was in the middle of all of what was going on, while at others I felt unnoticed and redundant. Nowadays, visibility and attention are presented as a currency, and also as a resource that can be optimized, hence stretchable and plastic

5 Wally, Waldo, Holger, Jura, Valdík, Fallu, Walter, Willy, Gille, Hugo, Ali, Fodhouli, Valdas... his name has been translated into different languages.

(Pedersen, Albris and Seaver 2021). In this vein, Yves Citton (2017) proposes that, instead of asking what we should be attentive to, we might also try to explore what to do with our attention, thus taking it as a form of action rather than a property.

But what is actually the intrigue behind the acts of hiding things and doing nothing? Perhaps red lights go off in our societies because it is a form of not disappearing properly, and because it provides us with time and space to explore other forms of knowledge and non-measurable value. However, the current corporate shift towards transparency, neoliberal notions of productivity, and overwhelming digital sharing are transforming attentional practices to the point that having time in public is a cause of social suffering (Zuboff 2019).

The ever-increasing datafication of everyday life across the world, with its tracking and mining, are also turning more difficult the decision to disappear, hide or be forgotten. Hence, the need to develop new techno-social infrastructures for digital sovereignty along forms of training for digital literacy (Herlo *et al.* 2021). We are talking of the capacity to navigate and keep our autonomy within global digital networks, which can hardly be the result of the absence of any work, or “inoperosity” (Agamben 2000), but a skilful oscillation between openness and closure, refusal and engagement.

Humankind has been trying to preserve knowledge by externalizing memory in forms that were not easily susceptible to alteration, like Sumerian cuneiform writings or Egyptian hieroglyphs (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). However, we have reached the point in which technologies have to facilitate forgetting. An example of this is the so-called “right to be forgotten” (approved by the EU in 2014), which relies on the legal idea that one can demand the removal of data about oneself that is accessible online, as a form of securing our digital privacy. The right to be forgotten can be placed along with the right to opacity and with the right to fail (Martínez 2019). This is because ambiguity, opacity, disorder and the opportunity to err and to change views are constitutive of human freedom (Morozov 2013). If we adapt too well to institutions, to markets, and to technological devices, our sense of adventure and the possibility of dissent become obsolete (Boym 2017). Because in these times of decreasing room for ambiguity, it has become more valuable than ever the capacity to say no and to do nothing.



In this article, I reconsidered the role of basements in negotiating the private and the public self in eastern Estonia. Storing things underground does not just refer to a displacement of stuff, but also to the relocation of certain meanings and actions away from plain sight. Things come to matter through our intimate relations with them, gaining a kind of value that is irreducible

to monetary worth and rather relates to personal and social history. But that intimate relation also comprises discard and putting things to sleep and apart for a while (Martínez forthcoming).

In this vein, we can conclude that the decision of keeping things in the dark is a way, among others, of curating knowledge, relationships, and social experiences of time. Further on, basements can be used in many ways: as a family archive, a material manifestation of subconscious desire, a playground of the repressed, a corner of self-expression, a room for historical and material density, and also a technology through which to rework regimes of (in)visibility and the social experience of time. They operate in the ongoing adjustments through which wider social and cultural changes are negotiated. They are a thermostat, a device that switches a motor on or off according to the temperature upstairs.

Alternative values and temporalities to those perceived as hegemonic find a location in the basements. Thus, we need the possibility of ambivalence and opacity despite being culturally challenging and socially anxious. They enact different ways of coping with the current hypervisibility, central accountability and hierarchical monitoring. By elaborating an argument to defend ambivalence and non-transparent spaces, we are foregrounding the right to opacity as a political project that resists the normalizing forces attempting to rule difference out and categorize relations.

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