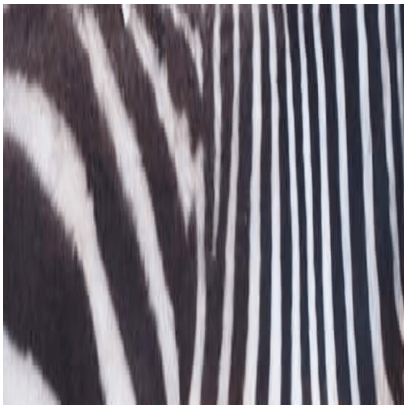


Obfuscate!

Description

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Why do zebras have stripes? The stripes arenâ??t very successful as camouflage. If anything, a stripy lone zebra stands out against the grassland. But any single zebra will blend in with the herd when they stand together. Itâ??s harder to tell where one zebra ends and the next one starts.

As they approach the herd, the visual field of lions or a hyenas is assaulted with vertiginous to-and-fro movement â?? somewhat stroboscopic. Any predator will be confused, just enough, to give the herd time to take evasive action. Such momentary obfuscation buys time.



Spiders also confuse predators. Some species are genetically programmed to litter their webs with the remnants of the insects they have consumed. These spider-like scraps become false targets for any wasp that wants to feed off the actual spider that presides over the web. The waspâ??s momentary mistargeting gives the spider more time to take cover.

Obfuscation is a wily tactic exercised by both predator and prey. Itâ??s also a feature of accidental and deliberate human tactics of attack and evasion.

Obfuscating architecture

One obvious architectural correlate of obfuscation is the building of a forked maze to confuse access to the centre, the tower, the keep, the gate to the city. Think also of markets, malls and fairgrounds, whose sounds, colours, and spatial confusion turns consumers into ready prey for the onslaught of advertisers and sellers.



From this spatial perspective, obfuscation is normal, and doesnâ??t need to imply anything devious or wilful on the part of the designer. The exterior of a building doesnâ??t necessarily convey the functions inside. That form conceals function may indeed confound would-be thieves in their search for valuables, but itâ??s rarely a prime motive of mimetic, faux, mock and counterfeit architectural elements.

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As a more prosaic example, the delivery dock to a supermarket is positioned and configured to be convenient for big trucks, and dissuade shoppers. The back of shop is *legible* to staff, but not to shoppers. The architecture directs consumers to the main public entrance, but no-one would think that a building designed with multiple readings in mind, and for multiple user groups constitutes wilful obfuscation.

In the old part of Edinburgh there are recesses in external walls that are the same shape and size as windows. Thatâ??s to preserve the regular patterns of openings across a wall, even where thereâ??s a chimney or fireplace on the inside. I donâ??t think thatâ??s to gain an advantage over would be house breakers.

A darker world

To be in this state, to obfuscate, to be so affected, or even to want to be so *obfuscated* is not exceptional. By some philosophical readings, the world is a seething mass of confusion anyway, and clarity is the exception, imposed by sophisticated cultural framings, and language.

To obfuscate is â??To confuse, bewilder, or stupefy,â?• according to the OED. But the first OED definition is â??to darken,â?• from the Latin *obfuscare*. From a Phenomenological reading (e.g. Martin Heidegger), our appropriation of the world can usefully be considered as in a process of revealing and concealing. As the spotlight of human perception and insight scans across the world it reveals one object, attribute or idea, but others recede into shadows and complete darkness.

The world is already a sea of zebra stripes. Itâ??s the lionâ??s acuity in marking out the exceptional, the small, the slow, the independent and the adventurous that represents the unusual moment of lucid

perception.

Obfuscating information

If we think though of clarity as the norm, then obfuscation represents a return to some primal state where everything is not so clear, itâ??s ambiguous, undifferentiated and confused. Hence, the task of obfuscation is effective as a tactic to confound the mind of the post-Enlightenment citizen.

A fascinating book by Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum outlines various obfuscatory tactics, their remedies and ethics: *Obfuscation: A Userâ??s Guide for Privacy and Protest*.

Here, obfuscation is informational and semiological. It pertains to information that we want to conceal. In the zebra case, the information is the location of one vulnerable, singular, individual that is potential prey. In the spider case, the information is simply the spiderâ??s location on the web. For Brunton and Nissenbaum,

> â??Obfuscation is contingent, shaped by the problems we seek to address and the adversaries we hope to foil or delay, but it is characterized by a simple underlying circumstance: unable to refuse or deny observation, we create many plausible, ambiguous, and misleading signals within which the information we want to conceal can be lostâ?• (7).

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Their book is a handbook to help readers avoid the inadvertent disclosure of personal online data, including oneâ??s location, and other information by which advertisers, government and foreign agencies, political operatives and hackers can surveille and profile us. The authors provide several means of obfuscating data, with examples â?¦ for another post.



Reference

- Brunton, Finn, and Helen Nissenbaum. 2015. *Obfuscation: A Userâ??s Guide for Privacy and Protest*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Note

- The zebra example is my own, relating what you get told by African safari guides. There are other theories, e.g. that the stripes confuse flies, or that they create convection currents on the animalâ??s body that aid in cooling. Such explanations are easy to find with a google search. The spider example comes from Brunton and Nissenbaumâ??s book, where they describe the tactics of *Cyclosa mulmeinensis*, an orb-weaving spider.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. animals
2. obfuscation
3. surveillance

Date Created
August 17, 2019
Author
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