

Night & Invisibility in Jakarta

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Saturday night at around 1 am, in a street in the Northern part of Jakarta, not far from the Mangga Besar entertainment district. We are entering an alley bordered by motor-cycles, cars and food stalls, just in front of karaokes, spas or massage parlours and bars. One of them displays "Bar and Massage". Once inside, a rather stuffy, smoky and ill-lit atmosphere, with pounding music and an elevated platform with a pole, on which dancers start to undress till fully naked. Indonesia is a country where nudity is prohibited in public venues. Nonetheless, it is a policeman from the police ward in charge of the neighbourhood who showed me the venue, knowing well where to go and what was happening in his precinct.

Midnight in a South Jakarta mall. All the stores are closed, but the mall is still open with security guards by the entrance. The escalators are not operating. Still we climb them and come to a discotheque which is open. It is a gay establishment and its existence is not advertised outside. Homosexuality is legal in Indonesia (except in the province of Aceh), but it is often looked down on. [field notes]

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These two instances of urban invisibles in Jakarta come from different repertoires. Yet they draw on similar methods of invisibility in order to carry out, on the one hand, illegal activities, on the other, marginal forms of sociability. They both question the logics and meanings of urban invisibility, especially at night. Although such attractions are part of the mainstream leisure sector, some activities must take place out of sight. The examples suggest how, and through what types of mechanisms, in a major metropolis of the Global South, invisibility can play a part in the functioning and governance of the city, while questioning the status of what is displayed to the general view.

First, the night is a kind of mask for these activities: in Indonesia, as in many other places, it is a time when one should stay home, to avoid being exposed to crime as well as other 'mystical' influences. It is a time of vulnerability, when one must be more alert. As a consequence, it is also a grey zone, when what is happening goes unnoticed, when "daily people" are less aware of what goes on in the city. In the above extracts, the darkness in the mall and the closure of most of the shops and restaurants prevent interaction, as well as conflict, between the various activities of the mall – most of its customers are unaware of the existence of such a club. In Mangga Besar, the accumulation of night venues also prevents any person not familiar with the neighbourhood from identifying the peculiar discotheque.

A second type of invisibility comes from maintaining appearances that do not correspond

exactly to what is inside the venues. Both have a façade that hides their activities. Signs here suggest that something different is happening from what is shown. Invisibility results from differences between what seems to exist and what is actually happening, as if what is visible outside and what is happening inside existed in parallel worlds. The absence of proper lighting in one case could suggest that the place is closed, even if guards are stationed outside. The “Bar and Massage” sign does not indicate a public strip-tease club. Yet, these two signs show the role played by façades for these activities, through their reference to other types of content. Invisibility is part of the organisation of the city. Parallelism and similitude are

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important to understand these urban landscapes. At night, a bar might be a strip-tease venue, a hotel a night club with small rooms in order to circumvent the Ramadan ban on discotheques, a regulation setting closing time

at 4 am might be a mere piece of paper, a woman a ghost, an Islamist demonstration in a leisure neighbourhood a means of racketing a club, etc.

In all these parallels, one sees how in Jakarta, the limits between visibility and invisibility overlap, how some ways of functioning are often disguised, how apparent meanings might be deceitful. Invisibility results from the discrepancies between outside sign and inside content: different people can give different meanings to the same post, situation or policy. The same message can be endowed with different meanings according to divergent means of understanding what is happening. While according to some authors the separation between places results from juxtapositions of different cultural understandings¹, here spaces and practices seem to be linked to the whole functioning of the city. Using the metaphor of dubbing, Boelstorff² points out that certain phenomena might look alike and yet have different interpretations according to where one is located. The tension between what is advertised and the actual content, between a rule and its application, seems a case in point: apparent breaches of the law are in fact part of the organisation of the city.

Invisibility in the city is often seen as a tactic used by urban subaltern people and outsiders to cope with the main constraints of society, by concealing themselves in order to pursue their business³. On the contrary, here such hiding techniques are employed by businesses owned by powerful stakeholders. The clubs usually belong to well-connected entrepreneurs, hardly a marginal category. Rather than being victims, these stakeholders are well connected to the government and its control agencies. In the excerpts from the field diary quoted above we find entrepreneurs owning and running the business, policemen not only turning a blind eye but actively introducing friends to the venue. This process of concealment and exposure is quite telling of the status of certain rules in the city. Such discrepancies are part of a territorial system where what counts is to keep things going and money flowing. Official regulations are regarded as distant references which, besides designating an official agency in charge of

1 M. Foucault (1967), « Des Espaces autres », in *Dits et écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

2 T. Boelstorff (2005), *The Gay Archipelago. Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press.

3 See for instance E. Goffman (1963/1977), *Stigmates. Les usages sociaux des handicaps*, Paris, Minuit ; H. Becker (1963), *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York, The Free Press ; M. de Certeau (1980/1990), *L'invention du quotidien, Arts de faire*, Paris, Gallimard ; and G. Chauncey (1994), *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York, BasicBooks.

the place, have little practical value.

Thus, invisibility appears as a paradoxical means to reduce risks and costs for the entrepreneurs who, by remaining outside the public sphere, are able to circumvent regulations depending on their contingent interests. Thus an unenforced closing-time regulation allows venues to remain open until late in the morning, when patrons and big fishes arrive. Invisibility thus functions as a means to keep the legal sphere at a convenient distance, letting things happen without interfering with their details. It is when these invisible practices damage the image of influential social groups, that they are denounced. For instance, in 2014, a big night club in Jakarta well known for drug use (in a country where drug trafficking leads to death penalty) was shut down when a policeman died of an overdose inside.

These modes of functioning are not restricted to night-time economy. Rather, they are a testimony of how the city is managed. Similar mechanisms also exist in other domains of city life. In the case of the police, payoffs are regularly exposed by NGOs, newspapers and researchers. In the city, regulations are often regarded as the basis for negotiation. Yet, these phenomena show that circumvention of regulations and informal arrangements among people are not exceptional, but rather part of an everyday process. In conclusion, different points of view offer different ways to understand the city and its governance. Night-time invisibility questions the thresholds between what is visible and what is invisible, as well as urban policies and practices at large.





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