


Camouflage aesthetics: militarisation, craftivism, and the in/visibility of resistance at scale

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Abstract

This intervention offers an aesthetic contribution to the studies of camouflage cultures by situating them in contemporary Ukraine. Using collaging as an analytic technique, I present three ontological cuts that demonstrate how scraps of camouflage remediate the spaces in which war is produced, contemplated and fought. Interrogating the relationship between visibility and survival on a macroscopic scale, I ask: how can camouflage scraps – textiles whose primary function is to conceal – work to reclaim the agency of those who craft them? I draw on the Ukrainian context to argue that not all militarisations are equal - cutting and layering the scraps of the Soviet/imperial military-industrial complex onto a new plane of representation, Ukrainian craftivists make a decolonial cut from Ukraine's Soviet past, reconstituting the social fabric torn in three centuries of wars and occupation. As hegemonic imperialist discourses continue to erase lived experiences of military violence, camouflage aesthetic may also become a symbol of collective resistance.

Keywords: [Camouflage](#), [networks](#), [collage](#), [militarisation](#), [war](#), [Ukraine](#)

Contemporary paradigms of warfare are based on precision and visibility. The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, has shifted the scales of vision, necessitating changes in devices and techniques of deception used by combatants. Camouflage netting, fragments of which can be seen in *Figure 1*, is one such technique; used since World War I, it aims to protect soldier bodies on the ground by separating them from mobile human and non-human spectators. Layering swatches of green, tan and khaki into a single – yet, non-singular – plane of representation, camouflage cross-cuts fields of vision by separating the watcher from an

entity whose existence depends on being invisible (Behrens, 2015). As a signature aesthetic of military power, camouflage textiles do much more than just render soldiers invisible from above; when seen from below, they may bring to the fore emerging forms of sociality and resistance hiding in plain sight.



Figure 1. Boichak, O. (2020) Camouflage: an aesthetic of resistance [Algorithmic collage]

This intervention offers an aesthetic contribution to the studies of camouflage cultures (Elias, Harley and Tsoutas, 2015) by situating them in contemporary Ukraine. In this social and historical context, decoloniality is commonly used to make sense of the intersecting postcommunist and postcolonial histories and lived experiences marked by the dissolution of the Russian/Soviet Empire (Tlostanova, 2012). In this work, my goal is to challenge the singular perspective on camouflage as a militarising aesthetic by foregrounding the hybrid ‘territories of production, reproduction and imagination’ (Haraway, 1991, p. 150), in which the threads of armed conflict are woven into the textures of everyday life. Using collaging as an analytic technique (Särmä, 2015), I present three ontological cuts¹ that demonstrate how scraps of camouflage – an object of distinct symbolic significance in militarising manoeuvres (Enloe, 2000) – remediate the multiplicity, incongruity and discontinuities of the spaces and temporalities in which war is produced, contemplated and fought. Interrogating the relationship between visibility and survival on a macroscopic scale, I ask: how can camouflage

scraps – textiles whose primary function is to conceal – work to reclaim the agency of those who craft them?

Cut 1. Conflict textiles: above and below the radar

‘In the material world, textiles are indeed smooth space and striated, communicator and silencer’ (Robertson, 2016, p. 353). Camouflage, which has evolved in response to risk as an attempt to protect oneself from harm (Hansford, 2015), is an aesthetic that, depending on the context, has a particular ability to communicate and to silence, make something invisible or bring it to the fore. Being a mimetic device, camouflage patterns serve a dual purpose: they conceal and secure a subject from being seen from above while foregrounding their visibility to those equipped with different means of observation (Haraway, 1988; Hüppauf, 2015). Changes in the ‘techniques of the observer’, whereby older and more familiar modes of recognition and visibility coexist with new ones, not only predicate changes in mimetic capacities but often bring about a broader change in social practices (Crary, 1992), including those around their production and use.

Camouflage netting has been in use since World War I but did not become an integral component of military anti-reconnaissance measures until World War II. This shift was driven by rapid advancements in aerial photography, radar and satellite imagery, as well as thermal and infrared imaging technologies (Keating, 1981). The Soviet Army – antecessor of both contemporary Russian and Ukrainian militaries – was known for its wide assortment of standard issue camouflage networks and techniques to construct protective screen covers (ibid.). These covers were highly modular and, depending on the season and the conditions “on the ground”, could be used for a variety of purposes, such as to conceal large military vehicles and combat equipment, bridges, trenches, as well secure communication infrastructure and restrict the observation of moving traffic (ibid.). Crucially, camouflage networks were also used to preserve objects of cultural and historical significance – such as architectural heritage – from wartime destruction.



Figure 2. Lange, D. (1942) Making camouflage nets for the War Department [Photograph]. Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California. Creative Commons PDM 1.0.

While there is scant historical evidence on the camouflage netting's effectiveness and use by armies around the world – relegated for the most part to the archives of military institutions – even less is known about its social life and cultural histories at the manufacturing stage. Despite the numerous advancements in the textile industry throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this object's macroscopic dimensions and specifications have made its production difficult to automate. To this day, camouflage netting is one of the more expensive military supply goods as most of it is still made by hand, which calls attention to the feminised labour in the textile industry (Enloe, 2014), as well as to the ways in which camouflage remediates women textile workers' connections to the military-industrial complex more broadly. Regressive remuneration systems instituted in textile factories, including payment by the piece, had concentrated control in the hands of factory owners – a move to deprive women workers of agency and ruin the social solidarities among them (Enloe, 2014). A haunting photographic record by Dorothea Lange (Figure 2) presents evidence of the War and Navy Department's use of forced migrant labour by persons of Japanese heritage confined at the Manzanar Relocation Center in California to produce camouflage netting during World War II.

These histories speak to the role of camouflage not only in concealing army positions from being seen by the enemy, but also obfuscating the military's reliance on contributions by women, as well as precarious workers more generally, for the production of camouflage nets. Is it, however, always the case that camouflage netting ruins social solidarities among those who craft it? The next cut further fragments the singular perspective on the militarising aesthetic by situating camouflage netting in twenty-first century Ukraine.

Cut 2. Crafting camouflage netting in Ukraine: the Spiders

In Ukraine, camouflage netting constitutes a central object of the craftivist² movement known as the Spiders. Seen through a decolonial lens, nets remediate a large-scale collective effort to resist the resurgent hegemony of Russian imperialism, advancing through a combination of civilian militarisation and 'boots on the ground' (Boichak, 2019, p. 64). Militarisation, generally understood as promoting military ends as a path toward general welfare (Enloe, 2000), was marked by the pervasive penetration of Russian imperialist war-related discourses into the psyche of Russian citizens – the 'sofa warriors' – in their domestic spaces³ (Asmolov, 2021). Through their portrayals of Ukraine as a 'failed state' and equating the newly elected Ukrainian government to a 'fascist junta' (Boichak and Jackson, 2020, p. 268), Russian state-sponsored disinformation campaigns have successfully mobilised the public in Russia in support of military violence, as well as produced an existential threat among Russian speakers in Ukraine (ibid.). This type of militarised cognition, through which citizens/soldiers get enlisted into the production of state-sanctioned violence, works on an ontological level by unsettling the geographic and perceptual borders between civilian lifeworlds and the places of violent conflict (Orr, 2004).

Spiders situate themselves among the grassroots volunteer initiatives which came into existence during the Maidan (Revolution of Dignity) in 2013, and have shifted their focus eastward following the Russian Federation's move to annex the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the subsequent geopolitical developments in eastern Ukraine. Unlike some of the overtly militant collectives such as *Zhinocha Sotnya* [The Women's Hundred], which saw women as an integral part of the nation-building project through prioritising their participation in the military establishment (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik, 2019), those volunteer organisations chose distinctly non-institutional ways to resist occupation, such as directly supporting soldiers, their family members, and civilians displaced by the conflict with food, hygiene supplies, warm clothes and first-aid kits, among others (Boichak, 2017). In this social and historical context, civilian mobilisation operates through a different set of logics and meanings, as it permeates the daily routines of the people involved in resisting the Russian hegemonic militarism. Rather than supporting the nation-state in a war effort against an enemy, the work of craftivists lies in exposing, and remediating, the failures of Ukraine's military logistics, as well as the military institution more broadly, to prevent combat-related and civilian deaths.

Spiders emerged as an eclectic, heterogeneous craftivist collective driven by the common goal to improve Ukrainian soldiers' chances of returning home from war. Discouraged by the scarcity and high costs of camouflage netting that was in short supply among the Ukrainian army units, a Kyiv woman developed a technique to craft military-grade nets by weaving discarded military textiles into a fishnet, and started a campaign encouraging others to do the same. This initiative, launched and supported by educated, urban, middle-class women in Ukraine's capital, saw a rapid expansion to include diverse communities based in rural and remote areas; for the first seven years of their existence, over 500 craftivist groups in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries took to manufacturing camouflage netting to conceal thousands of square kilometres of Ukrainian land – together with people and other objects of cultural and historical significance on it – from above.

Spiders came from all kinds of backgrounds, some of which were precarious; some were retired or battling a lifelong illness, others had always loved crafts or were looking to join a community, and still others had young children working along with them. Craftivist projects were predominantly organised and run by women, although men were often seen weaving the nets, hauling the sacks with raw materials or cutting them into scraps. Most organisations had both men and women working alongside each other; some spent their every day in the makeshift workshops while others dedicated a few hours after work. It was a life's work for some and a weekend hobby for others. In the words of a Spider, 'What can unite book enthusiasts, senior citizens, teachers, HR specialists, priests, librarians, accountants and entrepreneurs, physicists and humanitarians? Something that can be bought but is not for sale. Something that requires a lot of attention and patience, used to divert unwanted attention. Something that is made from scratch and from scraps, but is priceless? Yes, the nets. Camouflage nets. Those save lives'. While there was some fluctuation among the group's size and individual membership in the first years of the community's existence, many have continued their craftivist practices seven years into the conflict, while some have switched to other activities, started their own sewing businesses or ran for public office.

Some of these voluntary initiatives, which have started around aiding the Maidan protesters and grown into the organisation of battlefield relief, have led to the prominence of discourses and agendas that have drowned out the more quiet anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-hierarchical narratives and visions (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik, 2019). Yet, by making the Ukrainian territory and the people living on it 'hidden in plain sight' and invisible to the enemy's pervasive militarisation tactics, the Spiders played an important role in shaping the craftivist visions and vocabularies of the future; they used camouflage as an aesthetic, material and rhetorical device to dismantle wartime divisions across social groups that were caused by the Soviet/imperial militarising manoeuvres. If one were to join all of the nets crafted in the first two years of the movement's existence into a single patchwork quilt, it would cover a medium-sized city; if one were to join all the activist networks that contributed to this initiative together, it would cover the map of Ukraine.

On the surface, it may seem as if through their craftivism, Spiders reinforce traditional representations of masculinity ('frontline warriors') and femininity ('defenders of the homefront') (Jarymowycz, 2020). Yet, while the Spiders' craftivist practices still rely on feminised labour, they are militant in their solidarity; in weaving their literal and metaphorical networks, they found a way to organise outside the traditional institutions and identities while making themselves highly visible in public spaces. Camouflage networks are macroscopic objects that cannot be hidden away in private; they demand an appropriate public space for their collective creation. Some schools have converted their backyards into craftivist workshops, public libraries have surrendered their basements to the Spiders, public festivals now include network-making "gates" where visitors can weave in a few threads and take a selfie while doing so. Camouflage scraps have their own social life; they are sourced from discarded Ukrainian Army uniforms, humanitarian donations from Ukraine's strategic partners, scraps from tactical gear factories and old, Soviet-era bed linens from people's homes. Making the land and soldiers invisible at a macroscopic scale, collectively crafted camouflage networks also bridge and contest the divisions among traditionally marginalised identities (Jarymowycz, 2020), such as 'women', 'the elderly', 'people with disabilities' or 'people living in poverty', foregrounding these communities' visibility in public spaces and making them connected to others through their craftivism directed against Russian hegemonic militarisation.

As the case of the Spiders shows, not all militarisations are equal: there is a not-so-subtle distinction between the totalising militarism propagated by the Russian world, which in Tlostanova's definition reproduces the 'colonial logic of control, domination, and suppression' (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 132), and the counter-hegemonic resistance that concerns itself 'not [with] how to win a war in the world where wars are permanent, but how to build a world where war does not make any sense' (Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik, 2019, p. 51). Seen through a decolonial lens, activists were collectively crafting non-transactional solidarities and non-teleological visions of peace that elude and circumvent state- and capital-centred frameworks, and with them, their militarising agendas. Yet, these efforts can easily be obscured (or camouflaged, for lack of a better metaphor) if one were to keep within the traditional categories of militarising aesthetics.

Cut 3. Collage and the in/visibility of resistance at scale

As an epistemology, collage (re)politicises its constitutive fragments, delinking them from their institutional contexts and presenting an opportunity to consider critically their emerging meanings (Särmä, 2015). Joined through the act of cutting and layering fragments from across time and space (Friedberg, 2006), collage turns 'ontological cuts' into seams (Pyrhönen and Kantola, 2018) and highlights the points of convergence between its incongruous and heterogeneous elements. As we go about our daily lives, we encounter (and sometimes repurpose) fragments of the geopolitical (Särmä, 2015) to craft new solidarities, vocabularies and imaginaries of the future.



Figure 3. Boichak, O. (2020) Fragments of the geopolitical [Algorithmic collage]

Shifting the singular, linear perspective of the camera that has nowadays morphed into digital imagery captured by a drone, camouflage netting unsettles hegemonic understandings of the militarising aesthetic by working across the ontological cuts, and creating openings between private and public, human and animal, civil and military, craft and industry, personal and geopolitical. Concealing the bodies fighting against an occupying force, it brings to the fore a form of decolonial resistance, fragmenting historical path dependencies and reconstituting activist subjects. After all, the military-industrial complex has perhaps never been a singular entity fully separate from the civilian lifeworld (Boichak, 2021); instead, war can be better imagined and understood as a military-vernacular assemblage ‘of events and powers’ (Crary, 1992, p. 8), a multiple-frame image where the fragments of a violent past may be reclaimed, re-appropriated and re-territorialised into textiles that mediate the in/visibility of collective resistance. Cutting and layering the scraps of the Soviet/imperial military-industrial complex onto a new plane of representation, craftivists make a decolonial cut from Ukraine’s Soviet past, reconstituting the social fabric torn in three centuries of wars and occupation. As hegemonic imperialist discourses will likely continue to camouflage the lived experiences of military violence, the militarising aesthetic may also become a symbol of collective resistance.

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- ¹ By ontological cut, Friedberg (2006) refers to a boundary that separates, but also juxtaposes, one entity or context from but also against another. For example, a window may be seen as a boundary that demarcates but also conflates the indoor space of a home with a view of life outdoors.
- ² Craftivism represents a wide range of activist initiatives worldwide that aim at achieving social justice through arts (Greer, 2014). The activist networks discussed in this article do not explicitly tie themselves to the craftivist movement; yet, this is a helpful framework in light of their goals and means.
- ³ For a rich and nuanced analysis of ‘sofa warfare’, specifically the role of memes in the domestication of warfare in Russia, see Asmolov (2021).
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