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Secrecy and Exposure
in Cultural and Literary Studies

Camouflage

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Edited by
Wojciech Kalaga, *Marcin Mazurek* and *Marcin Sarnek*

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Camouflage. Between Fear and Desire

Out of a plethora of discursive attempts to grasp metaphorically the early twenty-first-century spirit of our late capitalist/postmodern condition, the notion of camouflage seems a particularly disturbing one. On the one hand, it implicitly problematizes the traditional postmodern dislike of the inside-outside distinction, directly or indirectly introducing a border between the visible and the invisible, the latent and the manifest, the form and the essence. If cognition is not only mediated but also distorted by a potential illusion – whether linguistic or visual – then the very process of perception seems inevitably contaminated by a strong sense, if not of cognitive uneasiness, then at least of perceptive uncertainty. Seen in these terms, the gesture of distrust, which the notion of camouflage inevitably includes, announces the return of rigid cultural divisions between the inside and the outside, divisions that a large number of post-modern and post-structuralist claims have managed to first theorize and then deconstruct, rendering our cultural landscape always-already open to transparent debate and open-ended evolution.

On the other hand, however, camouflage understood as a cultural practice, rather than a notion, offers, as well as the aforementioned sense of existential suspicion, a peculiar feeling of relief. In a culture in which there is "no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, [...] all-too-visible, the more visible-than-visible,"[1] camouflage brings back a restless glimmer of hope that not everything has already been theorized, visualized and represented. That behind the ever-present gaze – whether of the

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[1] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1988), pp. 21–22.

ubiquitous media, or of the remains of patriarchy – there exists the unspoken and the inexpressible in however latent a form. That underneath the never-ending play of ever-present signifiers there rests a deeper, perhaps even a metaphysical realm of the as-yet undiscovered presence.

Hence, seen as a promise of the unrepresented, the notion of camouflage remains intimately related with the desire it provokes – the desire to transgress the boundaries of social acceptability, political correctness, historical determination and other traces of the still detectable ideologies of Reason. Naturally, the desire to see through the fake cover of things is in itself open to a number of often contradictory interpretations. The desire – or rather desires – to uncover the truth behind the camouflage range from an urge to bring back the long gone grand narrative to an invitation to explore the repressed or forgotten components of identity, to a mere analysis of camouflage as a survival strategy.

But there remains yet a third way of approaching the notion/ practice of camouflage. Regardless of whether the drive to transgress the often invisible wall of the latent is instigated by social, discursive, psychoanalytical or survival motifs, one might still detect the sheer fear (rather than hope) connected with the prospective find. What if the truth behind the cover is more disturbing than the cover itself? What if what lies beneath turns out to escape our cognitive apparatuses, further interrupting our already shaken postmodern sense of the real? What if the truth beneath requires a whole new set of discursive practices and perspectives for which the contemporary confused subject might still not be ready? And finally – and perhaps most disturbingly – what if the camouflage is revealed to be camouflaging nothing at all?

That is what this book is about. About the variety of our perceptions of camouflage as well as the multitude of cultural practices it inspires and provokes. About the subtle tensions between the transparent nature of its discursive representations and the not-so-transparent structures of their ideological foundations. About the whole range of literary manifestations revolving around the ambiguous connections between the visible and the real and the way in which they are represented. But most of all, it is a book about the questions of the consequences of camouflage's double presence in our contemporary cultural environments, social and textual alike, the answers to which are located between the fear of what lies beneath and the often desperate desire that whatever it is it will enlarge rather than complicate the cognitive horizons of our postmodern landscapes.

For the sake of the reader's convenience the papers in this book have been divided into three main chapters revolving around the ideas of

suspicion, truth and concealment, respectively. This does not mean, however, that the distinction between them is always a clear-cut one. Just as the presence and range of camouflaging practices do not invite obvious divisions, the borders between textual inspirations and their social and philosophical translations are often vague, if not entirely hidden. Nevertheless, the arrangement of the papers is structured around a certain interpretative evolution. The initial sense of suspicion provoked by complex narrative strategies identified in particular texts generates a peculiar reading perspective, based as much on textual distrust, as on consistent attempts to uncover the meanings and assumptions behind textual representations. Once these mechanisms have been revealed it becomes clear that most of them serve a particular purpose: that of encoding whatever the texts' authors consider to be truthful messages worthy of being camouflaged, or whatever their readers consider as such. The process of encoding is subsequently followed by that of exposing concealed contents, this time reaching beyond multilayered analyses of concrete texts and also exploring non-literary cultural phenomena, particularly in cinematography.

The first part, Transgressing Suspicion, revolves around the notion of suspicion as an interpretative strategy. Tomasz Kalaga explores Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado" and the issue of narrative masking of intentions, games and ethics whose overlapping presence is superimposed upon the game of interpretation between the text, its narrator, and its reader. Hanna Boguta-Marchel's paper deals with the nature of voyeurism as illustrated in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God*, in which voyeurism forms a "transitional" offence between an attempt to satisfy the onlooker's desire, elimination of the inspected object, and ultimate self-destruction. A problematic redefinition of the notion of "mimicry" in Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* provides the departure point for Klara Szmańko's paper which – drawing on both psychoanalytical and post-colonial inspirations – explores the conceptual proximity between camouflage and warfare in the context of deconstructing ethnic stereotypes. Rafał Borysławski, in his paper devoted to two novels by Kazuo Ishiguro, analyses instances of reversed conspiracy where conspiracies are constructed as protective camouflage and thus directed inwards, towards the novels' protagonists rather than the outside world or the readers. Finally, the textual explorations in Part One are rounded off with Irena Księżopolska's symbolic interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov's debut novel *Mary*, which at first sight expects the reader to recognize the deceptiveness of the symbolically motivated imagery, but then, through further complexity of the deceptive pattern, oscillates between recognition and denial of the symbolic order.

Part Two, Encoding Truths, opens with Ewa Rychter's paper examining the relation between the notions of survival, eccentricity and camouflage as presented in the Bible and explored in Jeanette Winterson's first two novels, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Boating for Beginners*, which results in the emergence of "biblical camouflage" – a strategy employed by Winterson's protagonists who use the biblical text as a camouflage. Justyna Pacukiewicz explores the Victorian version of the religious crisis as presented in Alfred Tennyson's "In Memoriam," whose interpretation aims at disclosing the discursive strategies applied by "Darwinian" thinking of the Victorian rhetorician. Karolina Lebek, taking Robert Herrick's six-line poem "Upon Madam Ursly" as a point of departure, concentrates on the multilayered process of blurring the boundaries between the abject, object and subject through a series of cultural transformations and changing value systems incorporating the notions of ownership and ornamentality. Robert Browning's dramatic monologues provide an inspiration for Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech's paper which reveals how through a number of camouflaging techniques the poet is able to create a disturbing persona characterized by a fluctuating self-consciousness and, as a result, hamper uninvolved reading. Marek Pacukiewicz identifies various undertones of the concept of "homo duplex," a double context of body and spirit which informs Joseph Conrad's oeuvre, and introduces its open-ended discursive nature in an attempt to confront it with the anthropological dimension of cultural context. The section is closed by Eliene Mąka-Poulain's exploration of Philip Larkin's effort to unmask the way human beings deceive themselves through a multilayered relation between deception, illusion and truth, which, rather than providing a simple set of voyeuristic pleasures, seem to constitute an indispensable part of the very act of observation.

Decoding Concealment becomes the focal point of Part Three, largely devoted to cinematic representations of camouflage. Artur Piskorz scrutinises contemporary Hollywood conspiracy tendencies which constitute an artistic response to social and political upheavals, posing a question about the possibility of establishing any patterns of discourse between the classic and contemporary productions. Following the cinematic conspiracy path, Marcin Sarnek's presents an account of representation of secrecy and cryptography in contemporary American cinema, with particular emphasis on the character of a cryptographer-magician, a motif which has earned a truly solid position in today's popular imagination. Anna Krawczyk-Łaskarzewska, inspired by *Red Road*, a movie directed by Andrea Arnold, explores various surveillance theories, including Jeremy Bentham's panoptic design and Michel

Foucault's surveillance society, whose ideological foundations seem to theorise the binary opposition between the state and the society.

Much as it seems impossible to draw any universal conclusions concerning the nature, let alone the definition, of what camouflage is or even how it manifests itself on the contemporary cultural horizon, at least one observation seems beyond any doubt. As all the papers in this volume clearly demonstrate, it is not only the amount and variety of camouflage-related representations, whether literary, cinematic or other, which may puzzle the potential observer. Following the sometimes subtle yet detectable tone of a large number of the papers in this volume, it seems clear that camouflage – both as a concept and as practice – has evolved into a multilayered interpretative perspective modifying our post-modern cultural gaze and – through an implied sense of cognitive distrust – has made us aware that though its surfaces are often hard to find, its agents are potentially everywhere. As such, camouflage seems equipped with much more power than it would itself probably like to reveal: the power of situating us in an uncomfortable, though not necessarily hopeless, position between existential fear and interpretative desire.

Wojciech Kalaga, *Marcin Mazurek* and *Marcin Sarnek*

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