

Camouflage: using visual arts and sociology to understand the military

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Abstract

The military is the core institution of state sanctioned violence in Western liberal democracies. In the last decade or so the role of the military has changed and militarism has become an increasingly conspicuous aspect of public life. The idea of camouflage is used and developed to explore how collaboration between the visual arts and sociology can be used to denaturalise the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about the military in Australian society. Camouflage is explained in its military utility, its psychological concept (Gestalt theory) the art camouflage movement and their developed techniques (eg Cubism, Dadaism), and in terms of deconstruction or sociological critique as a tool for making social relations that are culturally camouflaged visible.

If artists see fields blue they are deranged and should go to an asylum. If they only pretend to see them blue, they are criminals and should go to prison.

Adolf Hitler

A madman takes things for what they are not, and people one for another; he cuts friends and recognises complete strangers; he thinks he is unmasking when, in fact, he is putting on a mask... he is unaware of difference.

Michel Foucault

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) highlights a structural phenomenon of the military in liberal democratic societies: the dialectic of violence and reason. Beginning with the horror of the torturous public spectacle the act of sovereign power is gratuitous and beastly. As the book progresses we learn about the domestication of violence and control through the imperatives of Enlightenment cultural practice – the application of reason and the practice of discipline. Also trying to understand the historical development of discipline and the military profession Muary Feld (1977: 23) writes of Goya's etchings, *The Caprichos (No 3 1797-8)* that represents the artist asleep at his desk while creatures of the night fly free behind him. The etching reads:

“The Sleep of Reason Brings Forth Monsters”. Goya intends that “Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters; united with her she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders”. Feld and Foucault both instruct us in the evolution of the notion of ‘discipline’: the historically specific cultivation of social forms through the application of reason. The military (as we know it today) as a professionalised rational and ordered social system emerges from this historical moment.

Writ large the institution of the military, an institution of state sanctioned organised violence, is also a mark of a civilised, ordered and disciplined society (Giddens, 1987 Mann, 1986:506-7, Dixon, 1976: 20-21, Caforio, 2006)¹. The production of soldiers from the raw material of civilians is a violent process, and soldiers are trained to use violence on command, against an enemy. Yet, the soldier and military present many of us with visions of discipline, even neutrality, and also order and control – the embodiment of reason. It is a curious phenomenon. It leads us to ask several questions about the military: how does this paradox sit within the public conscience in contemporary society? How do we produce and consume militarism as a culture? How do we make sense of the Janus faced incarnation of the military system? (see Janowitz & Shils, 1975, King, 2007)

The dualistic character of the military also plays out in a centre/periphery dynamic. On the one hand the military is conspicuous: Anzac Day, military operations, community infrastructure building or rebuilding, war memorials, military curriculum in our schools, or general protection of the public good. On the other hand it is abstruse, opaque, hermetically sealed off from the rest of society. Its operations are clouded, its cultural forms and practices furtive and often clandestine.

The military is a principal institution across the globe. It is the state sanctioned arm of legitimate violence, the protector of national interests and guardian of community values (Giddens, 1987; Caforio, 2006). While the military is central in this sense, and its character embroiled in broader generalised values like the Nation, the State and the National Character, it is also a peripheral institution. The military's work, and its operations, is often opaque. As an institution it sits behind the veil of State business, its operations are often covert, and as a culture it is hidden behind the gates and security of the military base. Civilians disappear into a military organisation and re-emerge soldiers and soldiers are different kinds of citizens than civilians. The military has its own justice system, police force, medical service and military communities have traditionally been closed communities. The military in this sense is a peripheral institution: it sits on the periphery of society.

For reasons not entirely clear sociology has neglected this characteristic of this institution to a large degree (Giddens, 1981: 22; Matthewman, 2008). It has been neglected in classical sociological theory, and until the 2nd World War largely ignored again except for the work of a few notable figures such as Norbert Elias. Even still the gaze that sociologists fix on this institution now are in sense myopic, predominantly focusing on the operations of this organisation, less so its structural force and institutional character. Indeed, one author (Oullet, 2005: 27) of an international reader on military sociology argues that a critical sociology of the military is unlikely, that the structural functionalist and phenomenological analysis of the military only possible.

In this paper we look for a concept to help us begin to unpack the dualistic character of the (Australian) military. At this point the paper is exploratory, trying to open up

the idea of camouflage, to develop it through cultural theory and only begin to test its application to the phenomena in question.

We adopt the military notion of camouflage and turn it back on the military. Camouflage is the art of concealing that you are being concealed. Our aim is to develop sociological theory with the help of the visual arts movement to help uncover the social reality of the military and militarism in Australian society. We argue that the notion of camouflage has various strengths in understanding the military and social relations more generally. Firstly, it describes a key imperative of any sociology – to develop ways of seeing and recognising social realities, to enhance translogical or stereoscopic thinking, to limit the misrecognition of social life. Secondly, the development of sociological theory, drawing on the strategies of camouflage, magic or artistic representation, outline the suite of tactics, strategies and practices that project discourse in its manifold ways. Thirdly, camouflage may be a basis for developing a critical sociology of the military, and finally, camouflage draws our attention to the structure of subjectivity, discourse, practice and cultural forms.

Camouflage: using a military notion to unpack the military

Depending on the source consulted the French word *camoufleur* means to ‘conceal, cover up, disguise’, to ‘put on make up’, or to ‘blow smoke’ (to disguise oneself for illicit purposes). It can be traced back to a 16th century French slang word *camouflet* meaning ‘a practical joke’. In this initial description we can see that this notion is characterised by a kind of double-play in the construction of meaning. Camouflage is a useful notion in that it shares the dualistic character of the military in many societies, expressing relations of presence and absence: whatever is camouflaged is present, but its presence is clouded, distorted, or blended.

In a pragmatic sense camouflage has become the science of hiding military elements (personnel, software and hardware) from the enemy so as to enhance allied advantage in the context of battle. This also applies to civil/military relations, and the way the military see and respond to the broader community. Incidents of perverse cultural practices, sexual harassment, inappropriate behaviour in operations or racism (see Wadham, 2004, Wadham & Pudsey, 2005) sometimes threaten the normalised invisibility of the military, their camouflage broken and their image and place in society questioned. The investigation of the concept of camouflage opens up new ways of seeing the military.

Camouflage is a strategy to generate and maintain dominance. The military as an institution is structured by, and through, relations of dominance. Having a role of both protector of liberal values but also being engaged in activities that transgress and desecrate those values, the way the military is represented, and manages its representation is of great significance. How is it for example, that dominant cultural perceptions of the military focus predominantly on its 'positive' role: as protector, civilised profession, rational leadership and national archetype, while the 'negative' characteristics of authoritarian, perpetrator of violence, and cultural perversion remain hidden.

It is here that the visual arts is informative, and its relationship with psychology, in particular gestalt theory², in helping to begin to understand how the social reality of the military is widely misrecognised or camouflaged.

This history of the development of the science of camouflage, and the influence of the visual artist is well described by Roy Behrens (2002). Camouflage is a notion and practice that is shaped by interactions between the military, the visual art movement and psychological theory, in particular gestalt theory. Historically, camouflage units

first appeared in the military during World War 1. There were units of *camoufleurs*, which were largely made up of soldiers who in civilian life were artists, architects and designers such as painters, sculptors, printmakers, graphic designers, illustrators, and set designers. Camouflage today has become increasingly specialised and developed into a science of concealment.

A prominent connection between art and camouflage emerged in the Bauhaus tradition developed by German architect Walter Gropius. Behrens (2002: 112) research on this subject explains that Bauhaus was implicitly connected with the notion of Gestalt. The concept of *Gestalten* emerged in the writing of Enlightenment philosophers Johann von Goethe, Immanuel Kant and Ernst Mach in the 1800s and refined and popularised philosopher Christian von Ehrenfeis in the late 1880s. Max Wertheimer, of the Berlin School is understood to have explicitly developed the idea of gestalt theory. Both notions are concerned with universal form, as opposed to the philosophy of structuralism that sees human enterprise as a system of interrelated elements. Gestalt is well known through the phrase “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” which has been a fundamental point of contest in continental philosophy. The notion of gestalt has an affiliation with the ideal of camouflage for several reasons. Principally, this affiliation arises because of the underlying notion of ‘the whole’. Perception according to Gestalt theorists is structured by an essential organising impulse to see the many parts of an object in terms of a whole. It is captured by a preoccupation with totality through association, or inference, as art theorist Rudolph Arnheim describes:

“... a building of pure utility shows more clearly than ever that the practically useful is at the same time beautiful. Even from the viewpoint of esthetic composition it feels good to see how railings, chair legs, door handles, or tea pots can be made of the same metal tubes...” (Arnheim cited in Behren, 2002: 112)

Camouflage is the disruption of that whole through the distortion of the elements of a totality, what has become known as *dazzle*, or through the subsumption of difference into the totality, what is known as *blending*. It is here that the notion of camouflage needs greater theoretical investigation given the relationship of gestalt with structuralism, the implication of theoretical concerns with the universal/particular, conceptions of the whole and the relations of inclusion/exclusion and sameness and difference³.

Blending, as a human practice, is mimicked from the 'natural' world. Abbot H. Thayer, a camoufleur and portrait painter looked to the natural setting to develop his notions of camouflage (Behrens, 1988). He focussed, in particular, on the ways that animals conceal themselves from predators. *Countershading* enables a bird or animal in the outdoors to fade into its background, to blend, by the use of different colouring to disrupt the normal reflections of light and shade. Artists are aware of this phenomenon and often simulate overhead lighting in the studio to create shading on an object in an attempt to create the illusion of solidity on a flat surface. This brings the subject into relief and makes an object discernible. Shading the lower part of the object with a darker colour, and progressively lightening the colour towards the top achieves this. *Countershading* is the opposite, the upper surface is represented darker and the lower surface is lighter. This means that an animal with countershading observed in sunlight would be less visible because its coloration cancels out the shading effect of the sun.

Thayer also observed 'mimicry' where the creature imitates its surroundings. Camoufleurs came up with a range of ingenious ways to make an object appear part of the surrounding terrain. While Thayer acknowledged the importance of figure-ground blending he was one of the first to introduce the idea of 'disruptive

colouration' where the surface continuity is broken up thus confusing the viewer. This was further developed by Naval Lieutenant Norman Wilkinson (designer and painter) and used effectively to protect ships from submarines and became known as 'dazzle' camouflage. Hence, as Behrens explains: "more than concealment camouflage is eliminating a boundary" (2002:182)

Let us now turn our attention to the way in which camouflage might be used to develop sociological theory for the analysis of the military.

From social camouflage to cultural camouflage.

The appeal of developing the notion of camouflage is in the way that this concept is aligned with notions within critical theory and/or deconstruction. Camouflage is principally about generating misrecognition. Misrecognition or more specifically, *meconnaissance*, is a notion that Bourdieu (1977: 6) uses to describe the ways in which social realities are concealed or masked. Mahar, Harker and Wilkes explain:

... participants do not conceal a practice by dressing it up as something else (in the sense of disguising it), but rather render it invisible through a displacement of understanding and a reconstrual as part of other aspects of the habitus 'that go without saying' (1990:19).

This is a reference to a process of naturalisation or what Codd (1990: 151) describes as essentialism, the rendering of something as taken-for-granted, natural, or without alternative (also see Connell, etc). While Mahar et al (1990) refute the notion of disguise in this passage we think their intention is to refute purposive action, as disguise is indeed what is achieved. In critical whiteness or critical masculinity studies for example, this process of naturalisation is further elaborated.

A common theoretical thread between the studies of masculinities and whiteness is the understanding that dominance retains its authority through its invisibility, by being accepted as 'natural' and taken-for-granted. One of the ways this happens is through

the articulation of masculinity as a universal, homogenous and cohesive subjectivity.

Homi Bhabha explains that:

To speak of masculinity, *sui generis*, must be avoided at all costs. It is as a discourse of self-generation, reproduced over the generations in patrilineal perpetuity, that masculinity seeks to make a name for itself. (Bhabha 1995: 57)

The military is in this sense a highly naturalised institution. Its presence in Australian society goes largely unquestioned (with exceptions), and its positive role in society is largely accepted and celebrated. Tropes of leadership, protection, sacrifice, courage, mateship and the national character work to blend the soldier into the fabric of the ideal society. This misrecognition is a form of cultural camouflage, the role of the military is blended into notions of the fair and free liberal democracy. Generally speaking, there is no alternative: to question the military as an institution is to be seen as an outsider, an idealist, a pacifist or as unrealistic.

This naturalised myopic experience of the military is scaffolded by versions of the dazzle technique of camouflage. Within the magicians toolbox this is conceived of as misdirection: "...it is not that magicians persuade an audience to absent minded, but rather that they cleverly prompt them to be present-minded toward other events..." (Behrens, 2002:162). For the military leader it may be turning the attention of the public to a general community concern outside of their responsibility, for example, a unique difficulties of a soldiers job and their need to "blow off steam", when the military becomes unblended by the inappropriate actions of its members (eg binge drinking, Klu Klux Klan photographs).

One example of the way dazzle perpetuates our misrecognition of the social reality of the military is evident in the field of military or war art. The predominantly official male war artist, over time, has represented the Australian soldier and his place in combat through the trope of courage, sacrifice and mateship. When attention is

directed toward a particular subject within art and camouflage it is described in gestalt theory in terms of simultaneous contrast or selective attention. The context is represented in particular ways, the relationship between figure and ground engineered. An objects meaning shifts in relation to the subject it is portrayed with.

Not coincidentally, it has often been official women war artists (for example Grace Cossington Smith or Stella Bowen) that have decamouflaged the glory of the courageous soldier, and the sanctuary of mateship, through their willingness to represent the mundane and terrible aspects of war – depression, death, the grief and loss of families, or the work of women on the homefront (Speck, 2004). It is not coincidental if we consider the highly gendered character of militarism, the role of men as warriors and leaders and women as carers, grieving mothers, and their roles in the war efforts.

Male artists like Albert Tucker, with his disturbing work “Psycho” a deeply shell shocked young soldier or “Victory Girls” which expressed the artists disgust with soldiers pig-like behaviour with women also decamouflage the military, uncovering some of the unsavoury aspects including the psychological destruction of the war experience or the sexually predatory behaviour of American soldiers visiting Brisbane in WWII. More recently, George Gittoes’ “Crossroad” depicts a soldier burdened with the emotional baggage of the Iraq war and “Bullet Proof Mind” represents a brutal and exaggerated sketch of soldier mentality. These images intentionally disorient us, unsettle and distract us with disruptive techniques uncovering the relatively sanitised version of war that the military and the State represent. They show the psychological brutalisation and physical destruction of war and distort the vision of the glorious masculine soldier by drawing attention to the ‘negative image’ of militarism.

The general strategies of camouflage outlined as blending and dazzle provide a nuance to social theoretical ideas such as discourse or the strategy and struggle of Bourdieu's field. Camouflage elucidates the techniques of representation that scaffold the relations of dominance. The Cubists, whose techniques are credited as informing the field of camouflage, describe the strategies of:

breaking of contours, the passage, so that a form merges with the space about it or with other forms; planes or tones that bleed into other planes and tones; outlines that coincide with other outlines, then suddenly reappear in new relations; surfaces that simultaneously recede and advance in relation to other surfaces; parts of objects shifted away, displaced, or changed in tone until forms disappear themselves (Sypher, W. 1960: 70).

In terms of social practice these are described in the literature of camouflage, magic and deception as including practices of misdirection – directing the mind toward diversionary aspects, or what Gregory Bateson describes as “news of difference” (Bateson, 1979) imitation and concealment; countershading and figure-ground blending; condensation, substitution displacement, production, restoration, modification, transposition, relocation all of which are variations on one overriding strategy – the representation of a subject that conceals its intentions. In the case of sociological theory, this is the misrecognition of social realities that perpetuate relations of dominance.

Camouflage and the art of cultural analysis

Australian sociology has not given much attention to the field of militarism and military sociology. And globally the rise of military sociology has focused on the dominant perceptions of the military as an unquestionable institution of liberal

democracies. The predominant theoretical traditions that have developed to understand the military have been structural functionalism and various forms of phenomenological inquiry. There has not been a clear direction in developing a critical theoretical model for understanding the military and military/civil relations.

The notion of camouflage, we argue, is innovative in this purpose. Camouflage is a military practice that when conceptualised sociologically highlights the dualistic character of the military in Australian society. Moreover, the traditions of gestalt theory and various artistic movements articulate the multiple strategies, tactics and practices that enable the camouflage of social realities. Reading camouflage also has an affinity with the broad purpose of sociology, to uncover social reality, to see the way in which meaning and practice, structure and agency, create particular voices and silences, presences and absences, inclusion and exclusions. To read camouflage is to see the engineered representation, that which is concealed, and the art of concealment. To see through camouflage then requires a particular critical vision. As Roy Behrens explains:

The law of identity tells us that A is A; while the law of contradiction says that not-A is not A. The algorithm for the translogical or inventive thinking is A is both A and not -A, which is, as earlier mentioned an outrage of the law of the excluded middle. It is paradoxical or stereoscopic awareness, in which the conventional ... and the unconventional... are juxtaposed within one mind... (Behrens, 2002:207)

Cultural Camouflage as a sociological concept for cultural analysis is a form of negative critique, or deconstruction. Fredric Jameson articulates this in terms of a new form of interpretation which we argue 'reading camouflage' gives us thus sublates the reading of the particular in the light of the absent universal:

Producing a new mode of interpretation in which the particular is read, not in the light of the universal, but rather in the light of the very contradiction between universal and particular in the first place. Interpretation now means turning the text inside out and making it into a symptom of the very problem of interpretation itself. (1990:32)

This notion of cultural camouflage then helps us to not only see the dominant representation of the military, and the way its representation camouflages its negative or absent relations (ie the arm of violence, the authoritarianism upon which freedom is constructed) but also the way in which the concept of a militarism and liberal democracy are framed by the dialectic of violence and reason.

Notes:

- 1 This paper cannot adequately describe the historical development of military sociology (including Comte, De Tocqueville, Elias, Marx, C W Mills Giddens, Feld, Shaw, but starts from a premise that military sociology remains an underdeveloped field of sociological endeavour. There are various schools of military sociology such as The American School, or the Classical Sociology or a Sociology of the Military Profession. My basis premise is that a critical approach to military sociology is the least developed and a fertile site for theoretical development (see the work of Cynthia Enloe for example).
- 2 While the notion of Gestalt is a modernist pssycholoigcla concept it addresses a range of related sociological and social theoretical notions. For example, Gestalt axiom “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” lies in contradistinction to “sui generis” the axiom of structuralism. The movements have both informed sociology as an influence on the understanding of reality, experience and meaning making. In this case we adopt the psychological theory as an object of study, not as psychological theory per se. As indicated in a further footnote, there is significant theoretical thought that the idea of camouflage and the tensions between Gestalt and Structuralism, and their influence on sociological theory invoke. However, space does not permit this enterprise for the moment.
- 3 For the purposes of this paper we have chosen to leave this level of inquiry aside.

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