DIGITAL WAR

Media strategies and visual politics during the full-scale attack of Russia on Ukraine

Department of Cultural Studies
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The conference *Digital War: Online-Media, Visual Politics and Crowdsourcing in the Russian War against Ukraine* takes the opportunity to investigate the digital war on social media and online platforms that has accompanied Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since January 18, 2022. In this context the participants analyze digital society and its relationship to war, violence, and power in a critical and reflective manner.

In his book *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st Century*, published in 2022, the sociologist and political consultant Matthew Ford, who is invited to the Vienna conference, argues that the Russian war in Ukraine is the first war between two states in Europe, that would be mediated by digital technologies and would blur the boundaries between soldiers and civilians.

Warfare on social media and online platforms has introduced a new type of mediatization of war: digital information warfare is dominated by a constant stream of images, a 'war feed' that generates attention with the new instruments of globalized communication spaces: news feed, subscriber principle and hash tagging.

The digital war of today is also a crowdsourcing war. Ukrainian civil society uses its smartphones to document war crimes and war damage. Combat operations, destruction, war crimes, violence and genocide are recorded, stored, and disseminated. In a new era of digital contemporary witnessing, Ukrainian media users collect audiovisual material to provide sources for later war crimes tribunals. These new forms of digital participation, online documentation and web archiving by media users and media providers create new methodological and empirical challenges for the evaluation of sources in digital forensics, criminal prosecution, and collective memory.

On October 24th and 25th, the University of Applied Arts in Vienna will become a center of excellence for the analysis of the media construction of the Russian war of invasion in Ukraine: researchers from the fields of political science, sociology, Eastern European studies, image theory, history, art theory, media studies, computational linguistics and communication studies, together with curators and artists, analyze discursive, visual and infrastructural frameworks and media that are used in the new digital war. The international conference will take place from October 24th to 25th, 2023 in the auditorium at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and will bring together 14 renowned scientists, artists and curators.

Tuesday, October 24th

Venue: University of Applied Arts Vienna, Auditorium, Vordere Zollamtsstraße 7, 1030 Vienna

9.30:   **Welcome speech Clemens Apprich, Vice-Rector**, University of Applied Arts, Vienna)
   Introduction Ramón Reichert, **Curator** (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

10.00, Keynotes, Panel 1: War in Digital Environments

Matthew Ford (Swedish Defense University, Stockholm): *From Innovation to Participation: the Smartphone, Connectivity, and the Conduct of Contemporary Warfare*

The war in Ukraine is the first conventional war to ever take place in an entirely connected information ecology. The internet has not been switched off. Mundane smart devices are ubiquitous. Now soldiers and ordinary civilians can participate in the conflict in ways that has never previously been possible. This stretches way beyond the connectivity that has shaped conflict in places like Syria, Tigray, and Mali. Now the smartphone can be used to geolocate enemy columns, control drones to range find for artillery, and produce and broadcast the damage assessment for online audiences to watch. Surveillance technology already makes it possible to track individual smartphone users. In times of peace these forms of surveillance are curtailed.

During a conventional war, however, private organizations and governments have reason to circumvent peacetime legal conventions. The result is that mundane connected technology forms part of an extended chain of sensors that feeds data and information to those involved in information warfare and targeting activities. In effect the smartphone has collapsed the means to fight and represent war into one device. This article maps the policy and military implications of these developments in relation to participation, the conduct of war and the law of armed conflict.

Andrew Hoskins (University of Glasgow): *The new War Front: Participatory War in Memory and History*

There is a new digital war over memory. Since the mid 2010s, a transformational memory boom has been unfolding, at astonishing speed and on an astonishing scale. This is the memory boom of and around the self. Never has the individual produced and shared so much information about themselves and their experiences. And the millions of messages, images, and video, pouring out of smartphones, surely makes the 2022- Russian war against Ukraine, the most documented and the most personalised war in history. Militaries, states, journalists, NGOs, private companies, soldiers, citizens, victims, are all recording and uploading their experience and vision of events second by second, tracking every twist and turn. The battlefield seems open to all.

But this is no panacea for either understanding or remembrance. Instead, social media make war and memory in their own image, through the siege for attention, disinformation, and splintered realities;

choose your own feed, select your own memory. I ask what kind of memory and history might – or might not – emerge from the Russian-Ukrainian war? Who will secure its past and how?

Panel discussion moderated by *Ramón Reichert* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

Coffee Break

12.00, Panel 2: War Speech: Text Analysis and Data-based Research

Maksim Markelov (University of Manchester): *Manipulating Meaning: Linguistic Strategies of Russophone Russian Trolls in Reframing Crimea's Annexation*

Hostile states' attempts to use media technologies to influence public opinion online pose a threat to the functioning of democratic institutions. The annexation of Crimea is one of the high-profile cases in which Russia was accused of such attempts. The growing scholarly inquiry into Russia's state-sponsored social media actors has drawn attention to the gravity and scale of this issue.

This article uses Anglophone and Russophone data from Twitter and Clemson University on Internet Research Agency (IRA)-affiliated actors, identified as Russian "trolls," and contrasts it with "non-troll" Tweets collected by the author on the topic of the Annexation. Building on our previous research into Anglophone Russian "troll" discourse, this paper focuses on IRA "trolls" speaking Russian.

We employ a combination of quantitative computational tools and qualitative methods to examine the specific linguistic strategies and tactics employed by these actors. We discuss the history and functioning of key terms used by Russian propaganda as reflected in the "troll" discourse. Further, we investigate the ideological and strategic significance of these key terms, as well as their interrelations with the Kremlin's master narratives.

We argue that the "troll's" use of language is strategic and that there is a marked difference between the Russophone and Anglophone "trolls'" discourse in terms of linguistic strategies and propaganda techniques. The analysis presented in this article has broader implications for our understanding of the relationship between language, society, and politics, and the extent to which current events, societal changes, and political decisions can influence language change, particularly online.

Grzegorz Ptaszek (University of Krakow): *The generalized themes in pro-Russian fake news spread during the Russian-Ukrainian war. Thematic analysis of fake news headlines from the EuvsDisinfo database using a thematic modeling method*

The use of disinformation in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation is not a new phenomenon. It was widely used in the Soviet Union during the Cold War and classified as one of the so-called "active

measures". Due to these measures, it was possible to influence the policies of another government, undermine trust in its leaders and institutions, divide nations, or spread theories distorting reality in a manner favorable to the interests of the Soviet state. The objective of the presentation is to show how Russia has drawn upon online disinformation in an organized manner through fake news in the global media. The data is an open database of fake news collected by the EuvsDisinfo project (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/). It contains news items identified as fake news found in the international news space since 2015, which were acknowledged as presenting a biased, distorted, or false picture of reality and as serving to spread a significant pro-Kremlin message (but not necessarily linked to the Kremlin or representing pro-Kremlin views). All fake news items from 01.01.2021 to 01.09. 2023 - a total of 2295 units - were selected from the database for study. The analysis of the material consisted of building a latent probabilistic structural topic model of the set of headlines and its in-depth analysis. This analysis includes an analysis of all topics in each stage of the war, an analysis of the topics about the foreign policy goals of the Russian Federation, and an analysis of associations and relationships between the topics.

Panel discussion moderated by *Florian Bettel* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

13.30: Lunch break

14.30, Panel 3: Meta-Framing Analysis: Genocide, War Crimes & Memory Politics

Lyudmyla Pavlyuk (University of Lviv): *Genocide and War Crimes as Meta-Frames of Assessment in the Representation of Russian Aggression in Ukrainian Media and Social Networks*

This presentation addresses two major qualifying meta-frames, namely "military crimes" and "genocide," which aim at assessing and generalizing a large corpus of facts, reflected in media, about the scale and facets of violence during the Russia-Ukraine military conflict.
Since February 24, 2022, Ukrainian media have reported multiple cases of Russia's military crimes against Ukrainian population that represent all possible violations of international humanitarian law specified in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and additional protocols, such as deliberate murder; torture; rape; large-scale destruction of property; illegal deportation of civilians; taking hostages, etc. Media reflections on the topic of crimes against civilians and prisoners of war appear in different discursive modes, ranging from the witness stories in social networks to professional (multi)media reports that include interviews with survivors after de-occupation of territories, as well as comments of experts, i.e. on the exhumation findings, and to statistics of different types of crimes that has been provided and updated by Office of Attorney General (about 80,000 war crimes committed by Russians

had been registered up to April, 2023, and the proceedings have started for more than 2,900 war-related crimes against children till June 1, 2023).

While uncovering the truth about civil casualties, Ukrainian public discourse is in fact documenting how Russian army wages war against symbols of Ukrainian statehood and identity and is targeting people on the ground of their citizenship and national belonging. In sum, the terms "war crimes" and "genocide" are at the core of representation of military conflict in Ukrainian public discourse. They are interpreted as a matter of judicial definitions in analytical genres and are perceived as part of connotative network in war stories about offences of the occupying army. Since the beginning of war, focus in media on the category of military crimes and genocidal practices have given hope to Ukrainian citizens for keeping the initiators of war and criminals accountable, which is seen as significant part of a fair solution to the conflict.

Tatsiana Astrouskaya (Herder Institute for Historical Research in East Central Europe, Marburg): *Performing Khatyn: the History of one WWII Massacre and Its Representations in Image and Text*

On March 22, 1943, the village of Khatyn (located in Lahoisk region, Belarus) was burnt down together with its 149 inhabitants by the Nazis and their collaborators. In 1969, a magnificent monument was erected on the site of the extermination, commemorating the suffering and resilience of Khatyn inhabitants quite in the spirit of Brezhnev's memory policies of the time (Oushakine 2013). The monument attracted millions of local and foreign tourists, including dozens of high-level officials, whilst its images were reproduced in countless copies in the Soviet Union and abroad.

The village's history and even more so its various interpretations in image and text rendered Belarus' particularity, laying the foundation stone of its post-war identity, Soviet and post-Soviet alike (Lewis 2015; Dorman 2017). Not less significant was the "export" value of Khatyn – the painful experience of war and its overcoming were melted together with the success of the Soviet modernization, and, ultimately, ensured the country's (even if limited) political autonomy. Whilst the memory of WWII remained in the kernel of the collective remembrances in Belarus during the whole period of post-socialism, in the aftermath of the suppressed Revolution 2020 and even more so with the beginning of the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine its meaning rocketed once again.

In this vein, the tragedy of Khatyn has been once again re-actualized. Aliaksandr Lukashenka's authoritarian regime announced the massive reconstruction of the memory site, adjoined by an ambitious media campaign. In search for legitimacy, the regime embarks on the symbolic meaning of Khatyn, attempting to claim its geopolitical significance in the region, justify its animosity to Ukraine, and patch internal raptures in the Belarusian society. In this paper, I trace how the memory of Khatyn's has been again and again performed on Soviet and Post-Soviet (social) media, focusing on the interaction of the visual and the textual. I am interested in how new digital technologies have been

employed in order to revive and weaponize the "old" historical mythology, and whether the former significantly alters the mode of the representation of the latter.

Panel discussion moderated by *Elena Shapira* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

Coffee Break

16.00, Panel 4: Russian State Propaganda: Othering, Founding Myths and Epic Narratives

Ian Garner (Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario): *We're Doing It Again: The Hyperreal Epic of Russia's War*

Since February 2022, Russian war supporters—following the state's lead—have consistently drawn parallels between the past and present, suggesting that today's war on Ukraine is a reiteration of mythicized conflicts of the past: the era of Tatar-Mongol rule, the Napoleonic wars, and most importantly the so-called Great Patriotic War. In representations of these conflicts, war and struggle is supposed to have produced new eras of Russian national success.

I explore how posters on several large patriotic groups on VK, the popular so-called "Russian Facebook," represent questions of time in memes, graphics, and videos disseminated on their networks—and, in turn, how commenters in this participatory media environment respond to those representations. I suggest that in online groups populated by self-selected users, posters and commenters participate in the co-creation of a virtual "epic" space where past, present, and future co-exist, and where participants live in a constant era of heroism that resists challenges to ascribed meanings. In this space, the disasters of war, the loss of compatriots, and the economic struggles afflicting Russia can be rewritten as elements of a present "valorized" time.

Vera Tolz-Zilitinkevic (University of Manchester): *Disinformation Dynamics, War in Ukraine, and Russia's Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity'*

This paper offers a qualitative analysis of how, by adopting identity-related discourses whose meanings resonate within a given culture, Russian state propaganda, mostly disseminated through state-funded television channels, strives to bolster "the truth status" of its Ukraine war claims. These discourses, the paper argues, have long historical lineages, and thus are expected to be familiar to audiences. The paper identifies three such discourses common in many contexts but with specific resonances in Russia, those of colonialism/decolonization, imperialism, and the imaginary West. The paper demonstrates that these same discourses also inform war-related coverage in Russophone oppositional social media channels. Russian state-affiliated and oppositional actors further share

"floating signifiers," particularly "the Russian people," "historical Russia," "the Russian world," "Ukraine," "fascism/Nazism," and "genocide," while according to radically different meanings. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of studying how state propaganda works at the level of discourses, and the acutely dialogical processes by which disinformation and counter-disinformation efforts are produced and consumed in the digital age.

Panel discussion moderated by *Christoper Frieß* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

18.00, Screening: *A refugee from Mariupol*. Directed by Olesia Batsman and Maria Vdovichenko. Ukraine, 2023, 70 min.

Wednesday, October 25th

Venue: University of Applied Arts Vienna, Auditorium, Vordere Zollamtsstraße 7, 1030 Vienna

10.00, Panel 5: War Narratives in Ukrainian Political Discourse

Yana Lysenko (University of Bremen): *A sensitive Topic: Talking about the Inhabitants of the Former "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" and the annexed Crimea in Ukrainian Political Discourse*

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion 2022, the narrative of social cohesion has dominated public discourse in Ukraine. While the intentions to retake the Ukrainian territories, which have been occupied since 2014, are openly and clearly communicated at all political levels of Ukraine, the question of how to deal with the inhabitants of these territories has faded into the background and seems to be avoided in the Ukrainian official political communication. The narratives concerning the inhabitants of the former "Donetsk People's Republic", "Luhansk People's Republic", and the Crimea annexed by Russia are analysed in this paper. The study aims to examine how the inhabitants of these regions are portrayed and addressed in Ukrainian current political discourse and how the topic of their future coexistence within Ukrainian society is treated.

For this purpose, discourse and framing analysis are used as methods in this study. The sample consists of written public statements, official speeches and interviews published on the official websites and official social media profiles of selected Ukrainian politicians and public figures from February 24, 2022 to September 30, 2023. The results of this analyses will provide an overview of the political narrative regarding the inhabitants of the former "People's Republics" and Crimea over time, thereby enabling the assessment of challenges for Ukraine's future integration policies.

Serhii Zasiekin (Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University, Ukraine): *Psycholinguistics of War Narratives by Ukrainians in Social Media and Literature*

In our research, which builds on our previous study (Zasiekin et al., 2022) of war testimonies posted on Facebook by Ukrainians during the first six months of the Russia-Ukraine War, we seek to identify psycholinguistic markers of war-related trauma in storytellers. The study has two main goals: a) to determine any changes that occurred in civilians at the end of the first year of the War; b) to compare the current data with those found in the war stories of Bohdan Lepkyi (1872-1941), outstanding Ukrainian writer and public figure, known for his literary works that depict strikingly similar content features of the War between Ukrainians fighting for their independence against the Russian Red Army a century ago and today's War against the same enemy.

Our study focuses on identifying the psycholinguistic markers of war-related trauma in the war narratives of Bohdan Lepkyi (1872-1941) and today's Ukrainians. We aim to determine any changes that occurred in civilians at the end of the first year of the Russia-Ukraine War and compare the current data with those found in Lepkyi's literary works that depict similar content features of the War between Ukrainians fighting for independence against the Russian Red Army a century ago and today's War against the same enemy.

Using the LIWC 2015 computer programme and ANOVA statistics, we processed 354 publicly available testimonies posted in the Facebook group "Writings from the War", together with 31 war stories by Lepkyi and a reference corpus of 100 literary prose texts by Ukrainian authors.

In the Facebook narratives, three LIWC categories of social relations prevailed: 'We', 'Social' and 'Family', representing shared values such as trust and protection among people who group in the face of threat. Another LIWC category, 'Achievement', which was insignificant during the first six months of the War, has gained prominence in the current narratives. This suggests that the Ukrainians are praising their advances after a year of fighting the enemy. In contrast, Lepkyi's stories showed none of this, implying that he could not rely on others during the tragic times of that War. Facebook authors opted for an analytical style, focusing more on higher cognitive processing of their painful experiences, and thus exhibiting psychological resilience, seen as a positive feature (Pennebaker et al., 2000). This is very different from Lepkyi, whose narrative style, together with low saturation of social bonding markers and drives and high indices of negative emotions, suggests that he may have been experiencing emotional distress, if not PTSD, at the time of writing because of the suffering of the previous War and its aftermath.

Panel discussion moderated by *Alexander Damianisch* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

11.30, Coffee Break

12.00, Panel 6: Ideologemes, Imperial Paradigms, Memory Politics

Oleksii Yakhno (Kiev/Vienna, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for the Research on Consequences of War): *The superpower ideologeme as a determinative factor of Russian foreign policy*

An attempt is made to describe the determinism of contemporary Russian politics by rigid ideologemes. These ideologemes are based on the imperial paradigm, which in turn has deep historical roots. These ideologemes do not represent a systematic structure, but they do influence the political decisions of the Russian leadership. Russian propaganda, which was directed at an internal audience, i.e., the Russian population, seems to have become a significant influence on the very top of Russian power.

During the last decades, the imperial propaganda, which was cultivated by the Russian mass media, was intended as a qualitative tool to legitimize Putin's regime and justify imperial ambitions. Under the impact of these ideologemes, the Russian leadership has formed an image of the state itself as a great superpower. The Russian leadership has become dependent on this image, making Russian foreign policy impervious to change and adjustments.

Mischa Gabowitsch (University of Vienna): *Banners, Flames, and Concrete: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine since February 2022*

The full-scale Russian attack on Ukraine since February 2022 has opened a new chapter in the history of Soviet and post-Soviet war memorials. In several post-socialist countries where Soviet war memorials had previously been largely exempted from iconoclastic policies, they are now being removed due to the perceived association with the Russian invasion. In Ukraine, some Soviet-era monuments have been removed or destroyed while others are being reinterpreted in support of the Ukrainian war effort. This presentation focuses on what has happened to war memorials on the frontlines and in occupied territory. The occupying forces have dismantled many memorials to Ukrainians who have died fighting Russian and Russian-backed forces since 2014, sometimes provoking resistance from residents. At the same time the occupiers have often made a show of renovating and honoring Soviet-era monuments to World War II in line with their claim that such monuments had been neglected by the Ukrainian authorities. Based on a forthcoming book, the paper presents findings from both online research and fieldwork carried out by my colleague Mykola Homanyuk under occupation in a Russian-controlled part of Ukraine.

Panel discussion moderated by *Veronika Kocher* (University of Applied Arts, Vienna)

14.00: Lunch break

16.00, Panel 6: Artistic Research & Film Screening

Venue: University of Applied Arts Vienna, Transarts Department, Rustenschacher Allee 2-4, 1020 Vienna

Lesia Kulchynska (Kyiv/Rom): *Limits of witnessing, and the role of art during the networked war*

The war in the digital era is accompanied by an inseparable from the instant and massive witnessing. Every citizen equipped with a smartphone can produce and circulate the instant evidence of every crime committed, document and share her own war-related experience. In the background of the mass production of visual evidence of the war, what is the role of art?

Social media became a platform for sharing artistic messages related to war, providing the desired instancy of the audience outreach and its emotional engagement. Yet after the first year of artistic witnessing of war, this strategy seems to face its limits: from algorithmic content moderation to the saturation of the attention market, loss of news value, and doubts in its efficiency. Exploring the influence of the architecture of social media on the artistic practices of witnessing and on setting its limits, I will try to map the artistic strategies that go beyond the established logic of networked war.

Yana Barinova (Kyiv/Vienna): *Memories of Mariupol*

This presentation is composed of personal memories of Mariupol. A biographical reconstruction of personal experiences, memories, and micro-history for a place of remembrance that is currently devastated.

Kateryna Lysovenko (Kyiv/Vienna): *Painting/War*

In an Artist Talk, INTRA researcher and curator Ramón Reichert talks to Kateryna Lysovenko about her creative-artistic understanding of aesthetic resistance in times of war, death, violence, destruction, genocide, thought control and the massive restrictions on human rights and freedom of expression. Lysovenko is engaged in the study of the relationship between ideology and painting, the production of the image of the victim in politics and art, from antiquity to the present day. She looks at painting as a language that can be instrumentalized or liberated.

Screening: *Chornobyl 22*. Directed by Oleksiy Radynski, Ukraine, 2023, 20 Minuten.