Image Laundering: A War In-Between

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❧ Abstract

This essay examines the layered structure of digital images in the context of the war in Ukraine, with a focus on how foregrounds and backgrounds are visually and conceptually manipulated to shape perception. It explores how digital media technologies enable the censorship, fabrication, and weaponization of images, blurring the line between reality and fiction. Drawing on historical visual strategies from Soviet Russia and contemporary practices in Russian state media, the essay traces how power operates through what is shown, hidden, or erased. It highlights the role of computer graphics and social media in the hyper-aestheticization of conflict.

A Censored Image

On 14 March 2022, three weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Marina Ovsyannikova, an employee of Russia's state-controlled Channel One, staged a rare and highly publicised anti-war protest during a live broadcast. During the evening news programme *Vremya*, Ovsyannikova walked in front of the cameras while the anchor was speaking, holding a handwritten poster that read: "No war. Stop the war. Don't believe the propaganda. They are lying to you here. Russians against war." The protest lasted only a few seconds before the broadcast abruptly cut away.

Figure 1: Screenshot from Vremya programme, Russia's Channel One, broadcast 14 March 2022.

Ovsyannikova's brief but impactful act disrupted the normal flow of images of Russian state television, which relies on meticulously curated backdrops and digital effects to maintain its narrative control. Positioned between the anchor and the backdrop, her protest exposed the constructed nature of the televised environment. Its apparatus typically includes interfaces that includes symbols, statistics, data visualizations, maps, digital collages, and manipulated images displayed in a manufactured studio setting that blends the physical and digital elements.

The event ruptured the layers of the televised image, revealing how media function as interfaces that transform and simplify complex three-dimensional realities into two-dimensional representations. However, Ovsyannikova's five-second intervention did more than disrupt the image – it deconstructed the very structure of two-dimensional media space itself. Her action prompted an immediate tightening of security protocols: live broadcasts were henceforth subjected to a mandatory one-minute delay. This temporal lag suspended broadcasting in time, enabling inspection and approval before release to audiences.

In the news articles that followed the event, Russian media censored the image by concealing Ovsyannikova's poster. The text on it was either blurred or covered with colored overlays. The anti-war statement was considered especially significant and fell under fresh oppressive laws that prohibit directly referring to the invasion as a war.
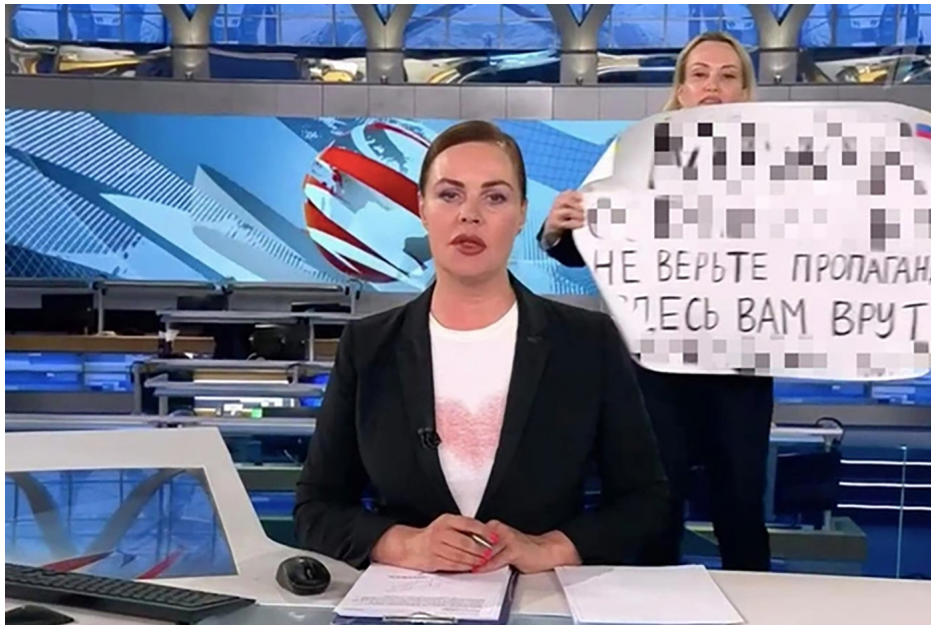

Figure 2: Screenshot published on 93.ru, an online media platform based in Krasnodar, Russia, 4 October 2023, with the words "No war. Stop the war. They are lying to you here. Russians against war" pixelated. 93.ru, https://93.ru/text/incidents/2023/10/04/72774863/.

Figure 3: Screenshot published by RuNews24.ru, an online news aggregator, 30 July 2024, with the words "No war. Stop the war. They are lying to you here. Russians against war" obscured. Dzen, https://dzen.ru/a/Zqj_oSMaR2FxjKYN.

The partial obscuring of an image is a direct continuation of visual censorship methods, which have a long history, particularly in Soviet Russia. In a state that emerged in a time of rapid technological development in the first half of the 20th century, images were systematically manipulated to erase purged figures and inconvenient events from historical records. A well-documented example is the progressive disappearance of Stalin's former associates from official photographs, as individuals fell out of favour and were subsequently erased through retouching – an act that paralleled their political repression. Another commonly employed technique was the deliberate obscuring of faces. The faces of "enemies of the people" were crudely blackened and thus erased from the visual record.

Figure 4: Obscured portraits from 10 Years of Uzbekistan, an album published in 1934. Campbell and King.

By the 1960s, techniques of redaction – black-out and white-out – had migrated into broader cultural practices. Conceptual artists and poets adopted these methods, turning obscuration, reduction, and deliberate omission into significant artistic strategies. Rather than rewriting or falsifying history, these gestures explored absence, silence, and erasure, seeking new forms of expression and communication.

Ilya Kabakov, a prominent Soviet and American conceptual artist, born in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, and a key figure in Moscow's underground art scene during the 1960s and 1970s, offered a unique perspective on the notion of emptiness – or *the void* – from the standpoint of an artist who emigrated from the USSR to the West. Kabakov compares two distinct conceptions of emptiness. In the Western tradition, shaped by Enlightenment ideals of progress and human mastery, emptiness is perceived as a passive or neutral space awaiting human intervention. It is envisioned as "a bare table that has not yet been set" or as land "awaiting man's labor" (Kabakov 370). By contrast, within the Soviet political and visual regime, Kabakov theorises emptiness as an active and aggressive force. Rather than passive, this form of emptiness is parasitic – feeding on existence. He describes it as "a reservoir of emptiness… reducing existence to its antithesis, destroying construction, mystifying reality, transforming everything into… active nonexistence" (370–371).

Today, such a binary opposition is difficult to sustain within the politically nuanced and complex landscape. What Kabakov once identified as a distinctly Soviet phenomenon – the active, destructive *void* – has become a more universal condition, manifesting in response to political instability, institutional distrust, and systemic opacity.

A pertinent example can be found in the work of documentary filmmaker and journalist Laura Poitras with her artistic investigation into surveillance, civil liberties, and national security in the post-9/11 era. Her exhibition *Astro Noise* at the Whitney Museum of American Art prominently featured redacted government documents, obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and lawsuits she filed to access records related to her placement on a government watchlist. In response, agencies such as the FBI released over 900 pages of material – many of them heavily redacted, with entire sections obscured under the pretext of legal or national security concerns. The redacted lines operate as evidence of concealment, revealing the act of hiding itself and distorting the viewer's grasp of reality.
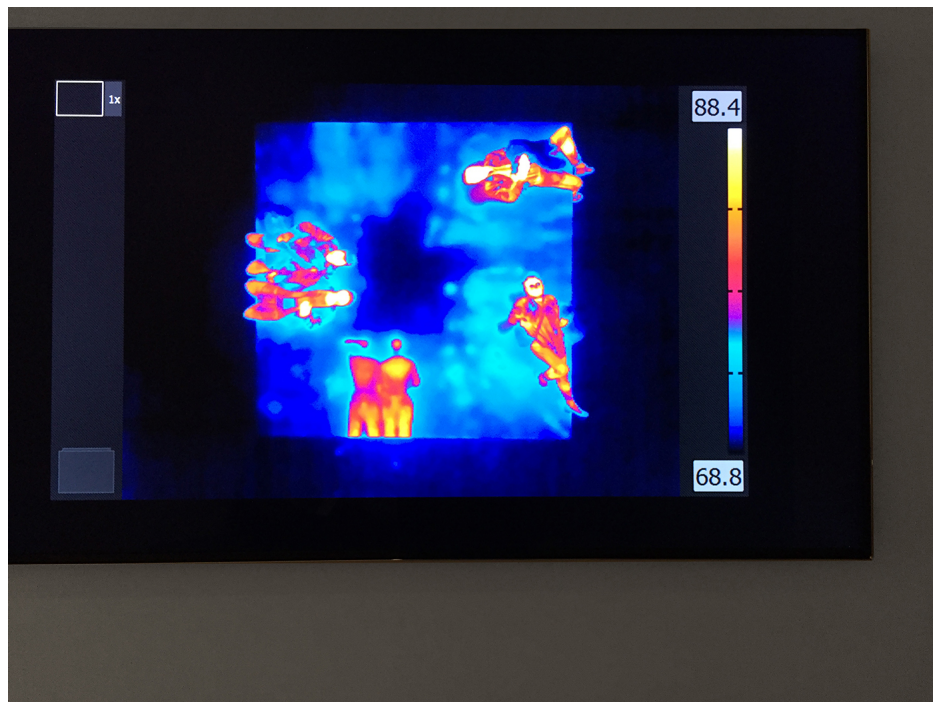

Figure 5: Photograph of Laura Poitras's work Bed Down Location featuring a video broadcast in which the author photographed herself, 2016.

Another work from the *Astro Noise* exhibition, *Bed Down Location* (2016), is a mixed-media installation that combines digital video, 3D sound design, infrared imaging, and closed-circuit footage to create an immersive surveillance environment. Visitors lie beneath a projected digital night sky, becoming vulnerable bodies under constant unnoticed observation. An infrared camera captures thermal images of participants, which are displayed on a monitor near the exit – delayed by several minutes – so viewers see their own image only as they are about to leave.

This temporal lag echoes the controlled delays employed in live news broadcasts discussed earlier. Unlike broadcasting, where such delays are concealed and serve political purposes, Poitras's work makes the delay visible and tangible: it implicates viewers on both sides of the surveillance apparatus – both as the watched and the watchers – heightening their awareness of the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded within systems of observation.

The drained individual agency – what can today be understood as *the void* – is precisely what various political regimes may rely upon, including those described by Kabakov and Poitras. Visual frameworks play an active role in this process, particularly through digital images.

A Digital Image in the Context of War

Emerged in the 1950s, digital imaging technologies were shaped by Cold War imperatives and developed within a techno-political landscape where visibility, simulation, and control became increasingly entangled. The origins of the digital image are inseparable from the context of warfare: early computer graphics were created to calculate missile trajectories, embedding computation in military objectives from the outset.

With the advent of screens, these technologies shifted from merely displaying information to becoming active simulation environments. Screens evolved into dynamic sites for visualizing complex data, enabling targeting, modelling, and operational control. Over the following decades, computer graphics developed from static representations into dynamic, interactive interfaces – integrated into everyday devices such as televisions, urban screens, and smartphones. At the same time, these technologies enabled new forms of pervasive surveillance, including CCTV, biometric systems, and facial recognition software.

While the Gulf War is widely credited as the first conflict to be mediated through real-time television broadcasting, with footage from cameras mounted on American aircraft transmitted directly to domestic audiences, the role of the image in contemporary warfare has since evolved significantly. Today, the digital image plays a central role in conflict, with the mass production and circulation of visuals turning media into what Donatella Della Ratta (97) terms "multipliers of violence." The war in Ukraine is unfolding within a social media–driven ecosystem, recorded and shared by countless personal devices. Although it is the most documented conflict in human history (Hoskins and Shchelin), this does not lead to its transparency – rather, the opposite. It is simultaneously the most sanitised war in terms of mainstream media and the least sanitised one in terms of social media platforms. This disjunction reveals not only a clash of ideologies but also a struggle over the aesthetic and emotional regimes of war.

Through social media feeds and notification systems, audiences are no longer distant observers but are emotionally and cognitively tethered to the progression of war. This state of constant exposure results in what Ford and Hoskins term

affective proximity – a condition in which individuals negotiate war's presence as it oscillates between the background and foreground of daily life. Much like subscribing to a streaming platform, individuals receive regular, algorithmically curated updates on destruction, survival, and resistance, becoming enmeshed in a war that is both overexposed and undercontextualised.

This process unfolds on platforms like Telegram and other decentralised channels, where grainy smartphone footage, GoPro recordings, and drone videos circulate widely – fragmentary and often unmediated records of war's visceral reality. Characterised by low resolution and chaotic framing, these images and videos carry a highly affective charge that pierces through their technical imperfections. Tens of thousands of such images and clips are collected, shared, and disseminated across networks, private chats, and news platforms, accompanied by systematic efforts to shape these visual streams. Telegram has become a particularly significant platform, hosting a wide spectrum of Russian channels covering the war in Ukraine – from openly propagandistic, pro-government war correspondents to channels run by servicemen and aggregators compiling so-called "patriotic" content.

Figure 6: Screenshots from a video published on the Telegram channel @voenkorKotenok, 8 June 2025, 17:50.

At the same time, Russian state television has developed a highly controlled approach to media representation, turning war coverage into a visually coherent and curated spectacle. Digitally produced or altered backdrops often replace the actual conditions of conflict, with anchors delivering narratives against these constructed visuals. Coverage tends to omit images of refugees and casualties, presenting instead a streamlined version of events in which military hardware becomes symbolic and abstracted. The representation of war shifts into a form of performance, where destruction is obscured by graphic design and simulation. This strategy exemplifies what Fuller and Weizman (84) describe as "the mediatic

condition," in which digital technologies are employed to destabilise knowledge and influence perception.

Figure 7: Screenshot from News at 2pm programme, Russia's Channel One, broadcast 20 July 2022.

Figure 8: Screenshot from Segodnya news programme at 7pm, Russia's NTV Channel, broadcast 20 June 2023.

The war in Ukraine has emerged not only as a geopolitical rupture but also as a media event, shaped by radical shifts in how visual content is produced, circulated, and received. The "relationship between violence and visibility within the participatory dimension of networked communications technologies" (Della Ratta 92–93) is once again being redefined. The convergence of media flows, technological apparatuses, and diverse human and nonhuman agents generates an informational spasm – an eruption in which the boundaries of reality become increasingly unstable. In this volatile interplay, reality is not merely represented but actively transformed, continually reshaped by digital and material forces. What is most unsettling, however, is the dissolution of the very line between real and

illusory. Everything – whether fabricated or factual – has migrated into the realm of the real, where even illusions are absorbed into lived experience, becoming indistinguishable from it: "everything has passed into the real, even illusions" (Fuller and Weizman 81).

Figure 9: Screenshot from Vesti at 8pm programme, Russia's VGTRK Rossiya 1 Channel, broadcast 19 December 2023

Figure 10: Screenshot from Vremya programme, Russia's Channel One, broadcast 19 December 2023.

Fabrication of Reality and Image Laundering: From Eisenstein to Simonyan

The fabrication of reality has a long and deeply embedded history in Russian cinematic and visual culture, tracing back to early Soviet filmmaking. One of the most emblematic and widely studied fabrications is Sergei Eisenstein's *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1927), which reimagined the 1917 Revolution a decade after the event. For generations, many viewers interpreted the film as a

documentary record rather than a heavily staged reconstruction. Commissioned by the October Jubilee Committee, the film became one of the Soviet Union's most ambitious cinematic projects. Eisenstein's montage techniques – combining the *montage of attractions* to provoke visceral emotional responses with *intellectual montage* designed to elicit conceptual associations – constructed a stylised, ideologically charged narrative of revolution.

As technology began to develop, so too did the methods and materials of fabrication. The rise of digital media and artificial intelligence (AI) has ushered in a new era in which the fabrication of reality has become easier, more seamless, automated, and imperceptible than ever before. In this context, state-controlled propaganda networks such as Russia Today (RT) represent a significant frontier. In November 2024, Margarita Simonyan, RT's editor-in-chief, disclosed that a substantial proportion of the network's presenters are now entirely AI-generated[1]. According to Simonyan, these virtual personas – comprising artificial voices, appearances, and behaviours – were never based on real individuals. Also, RT has ceased employing human broadcast editors, instead delegating image selection and creation to AI systems. AI is also used for dubbing purposes, re-translating political speeches with synchronised lip movements to generate multilingual synthetic content.

This consolidation of narrative power through AI technologies marks a new escalation in the aestheticisation of propaganda. Hyperreal visuals, prioritising the act of representation over the content represented, transform journalism into an immersive experience devoid of accountability. The polished appearance of such broadcasts fosters a disarmingly persuasive realism, displacing fact-checking with affective resonance. Yet arguably, the most effective manipulations may not come from fully synthetic avatars, but from subtly altered footage of real anchors. These minimal interventions, free of perceptible digital artefacts, exemplify what forensic researchers refer to as "image laundering" (Mandelli, Bestagini, and Tubaro), a process by which authentic visuals are algorithmically transformed into synthetic outputs, with original traces meticulously erased.

Image laundering is not merely a technical phenomenon. It is an epistemic strategy of obfuscating knowledge: an algorithmic sleight of hand that conceals reality in plain sight. In this process, details are erased, rewritten, and multiplied, producing an unprecedented disorientation. This destabilising effect evokes a paradoxical sense of unease, similar to *the uncanny valley*, where subtle alterations undermine the viewer's ability to trust the image. The image's infinite capacity for mutation becomes its shield, while the viewer's growing suspicion fosters a state of cognitive and political destabilisation, in which natural curiosity is replaces with distrust.

This disorientation profoundly affects the relational fabric between participants in visual media. It echoes Ariella Azoulay's concept of the civil contract of photography, which frames the image not merely as a representational artefact but as a political practice structured by intersubjective obligations. According to

Azoulay, photography constitutes a "hypothetical, imagined arrangement regulating relations within a virtual political community" (23). This civil contract entails an implicit agreement among the photographed subject, the photographer, and the viewer, predicated on the possibility of mutual recognition and responsibility. The viewer is called not simply to look, but to respond ethically – to acknowledge the subject's condition and to engage in a shared world.

In the context of fabricated or algorithmically modified images, this civil contract is strained to breaking point, if we follow Azoulay's perspective. When images no longer attest to any stable referent – when they are produced without a subject or witnessed event – the very grounds of that relational pact become compromised. The viewer can no longer discern whether there is a subject in need of recognition, or whether what they are witnessing is an illusion designed to trigger affect without responsibility.

Expanding on Azoulay's argument, Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman introduce the notion of the aesthetic-political-epistemic commons – a shared space of visual and cognitive labour through which truth can be collectively reconstructed in resistance to state and corporate regimes of control. The commons, as they theorise it, is not a fixed or pre-given entity but a dynamic, relational practice that integrates forensic investigation, artistic intervention, and collaborative witnessing. It constitutes a form of counter-visuality that challenges hegemonic representations and assembles dispersed data points into new constellations of meaning.

This approach resonates powerfully with the nature of the contemporary digital image. No longer a singular or stable object, the image has become a mutable field of operations – layered, recombinant, and often indeterminate. In such a context, the ethical and political stakes of visuality demand rethinking. Responsibility for the image is increasingly diffuse; witnessing is mediated and fragmented; and the rights to alter, circulate, or interpret images are contested and unstable. These issues gain particular urgency in the age of AI-driven manipulation, where authorship is distributed across human and nonhuman agents, and the conditions of visibility are shaped by opaque algorithmic processes.

What was once a tangible photograph is now a fluid construct, a layered simulation in which distinctions between real and artificial, authentic and manipulated, are persistently blurred. Yet this very indeterminacy can also be mobilised as a critical resource. By foregrounding the contingency, constructedness, and multiplicity of images, we might begin to reclaim visuality as a site of contestation rather than submission. Rather than retreating into nihilism or nostalgia for lost referents, the task becomes one of assembling new forms of collective scrutiny and resistance – new contracts, however fragile, that reassert the possibility of shared witnessing in the face of systemic obfuscation.

The Layers and the Backdrop

This brings us to a related and equally significant concept: the layers and the background, considered from visual, informational, and conceptual perspectives. It recalls Arjun Appadurai's notion of colonial photographic backdrops as tools for experimenting with "visual modernity." Once passive yet pivotal, these backdrops now function as silent agents of visual storytelling, functioning as "symptoms of power relations" (Anikina 276). No longer merely compositional, the background becomes structural and affective, reflecting the condition of post-Soviet as theorised by Madina Tlostanova.

Tlostanova's work provides a critical epistemological lens for understanding the aftermath of Soviet modernity within broader decolonial frameworks. She critiques the limitations of traditional postcolonial theory, arguing that its Eurocentric foundations are insufficient to address the specific geopolitical and affective entanglements of the post-Soviet space. In its place, she proposes a decolonial approach that accounts for the hybrid legacies of Soviet imperialism and their entwinement with global neoliberal systems. Within this framework, the post-Soviet condition is characterised by a unique form of temporal dislocation and ontological instability.

Central to this condition is what Tlostanova terms *futurelessness* – the collapse of a collective vision of the future that once structured Soviet subjectivity. The Soviet project was built around a utopian horizon – a "radiant future" – which organised time, labour, and meaning. Its collapse has left a vacuum, a conceptual and affective gap. Tlostanova calls this absence a *scarred temporality*: time not simply broken or nonlinear, but persistently wounded, experienced through fragmented memories, deferred hopes, and an uneasy entanglement with the temporalities of global capitalism. In this landscape, the post-Soviet subject is suspended between nostalgia and neoliberal precarity.

Importantly, this condition is not merely personal or psychological – it is structural. It is shaped by political violence, extractive economies, and epistemic delegitimation. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this condition has intensified. The post-Soviet background – once marked by ideological ambivalence and temporal stagnation – has re-emerged in heightened form: as the visual and affective infrastructure of contemporary warfare.

This in-between space – a political and cultural condition – mirrors the unstable relationship between foreground and background in a digital image. It is a liminal zone, like the one disrupted by Marina Ovsyannikova when she stepped into the frame of live Russian state television holding a handwritten anti-war sign. Her act ruptured the background's presumed neutrality, transforming it into the foreground and exposing the usually invisible infrastructure of propaganda as both visible and fragile.

This liminality also reflects a broader condition of spectatorship in times of war. Russian society, and much of the world beyond – has become habituated to living against the backdrop of a distant conflict: one that unfolds "elsewhere," but not "here," not "now." This habituation is not merely a product of ideological fatigue; it is actively cultivated. What sustains it is image laundering, a technique of visual sanitisation in which war imagery is curated, filtered, or algorithmically generated to erase trauma, aestheticise violence, and redirect affect.

In this context, the background is not simply ambient – it is strategic. The emotional and perceptual detachment it fosters is no accident. It is part of a broader regime of *hyperaesthesia*, a concept developed by Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman and to describe "a central tool of state terror" (Fuller and Weizman 89). This condition, in which sensory saturation paradoxically leads to emotional numbing, is cultivated through overexposure to destruction via state-controlled media, social networks, and synthetic imagery.

State power, then, does not merely manipulate images – it re-engineers the very conditions under which images are experienced and believed. In doing so, it imposes a new kind of contract: a revision of Ariella Azoulay's civil contract of photography, now recalibrated for the realities of cyberwarfare. As Dyer-Witheford and Matviyenko suggest, this revised contract is mediated by digital platforms, AI systems, and Cold War imaginaries. Thus, to live within this regime is to be surrounded by layers of misinformation, ideology, technological mediation, and historical residue. The image becomes a stratified object, composed of both visible and invisible surfaces. The background, once inert, now exerts a subtle pressure on perception. It is not merely what we look at, but what we look through. It frames, distorts, and conditions our relationship to reality. And in doing so, it calls for a new critical vocabulary – one that accounts not only for what is shown, but for what makes the showing possible.

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Biography

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